

**Fetishism as Historical Practice
in Postmodern American Fiction**

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ABSTRACT

This study contends that postmodern American fiction dramatizes an important shift of philosophical perspective on the fetish in keeping with recent theories of fetishism as a cultural practice. This shift is defined by the refusal to accept the traditional Western condemnation of the fetishist as primitive or perverse, and by the effort to affirm more productive uses for fetishism as a theoretical concept spanning the disciplines of psychoanalysis, Marxian social theory, and anthropology. Analyzing the depiction of fetishistic practices in selected contemporary American novels, the dissertation utilizes fetish theory in order to clarify the unique textual and historiographic features of postmodernist fiction. It also emphasizes the way in which conventional ideas about history and teleology are necessarily challenged by an affirmative orientation toward the fetish. Part One of the dissertation, comprising the first two chapters, traces the lineage of Western thinking about fetishism from Hegel, Marx, and Freud to Derrida, Baudrillard, and Jameson, among others. Recognizing that traditional theories attribute the symbolic power of the fetish to its mystification of historical origins, Part One posits that poststructuralist and postmodernist contributions to the subject enable, but do not develop, an alternative concept of fetishism as a practice with constructive historical potential. Part Two of the study seeks to develop this historical potential with reference to prominent descriptive models of postmodernist fiction, and through close readings of five contemporary American authors: Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, John Hawkes, and Don DeLillo. The four chapters of Part Two each examine the fictional representation of fetishism within a different theoretical framework, focusing on,

respectively: temporality and objectivity in postmodern fiction theory; the interrelation between psychoanalytic theory and female fetishism in novels by Pynchon and Acker; the depiction of ritualized sadomasochistic practices in Coover and Hawkes; and the complex relationship between commodity fetishism, ideology, and technology in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. The study concludes that postmodern American fiction, while not unwavering in its political endorsement of fetishistic practices, portrays fetishism as a strategy for elaborating new forms of historical consciousness.

PRÉCIS

La présente étude soutient que la fiction américaine postmoderne met clairement en lumière un déplacement de la perspective philosophique sur le fétiche puisqu'elle s'accorde avec les récentes théories du fétichisme à titre de pratique culturelle. Ce virage se définit par le refus d'accepter la condamnation occidentale traditionnelle du fétichiste réputé primitif ou pervers et par les efforts déployés afin de soutenir des emplois plus féconds du fétichisme en tant que concept théorique embrassant les disciplines de la psychanalyse, du marxisme et de l'anthropologie. Analysant la représentation des pratiques fétichistes dans un éventail choisi de romans américains contemporains, le présent mémoire se fonde sur la théorie du fétichisme pour clarifier les caractéristiques textuelles et historiographiques uniques de la fiction postmoderne. Il met également l'accent sur la façon dont les idées traditionnelles au sujet de l'histoire et de la téléologie sont nécessairement mises en question par une nette orientation vers le fétiche. Composée des deux premiers chapitres, la partie I du présent mémoire reconstitue l'évolution de la pensée occidentale en matière de fétichisme notamment à partir de Hegel, Marx et Freud jusqu'à Derrida, Baudrillard et Jameson. Reconnaisant que les théories classiques attribuent le pouvoir symbolique du fétiche à la mystification des origines historiques, la partie I pose en principe que les contributions poststructuralistes et postmodernes à la question permettent d'établir--sans toutefois élaborer--un concept parallèle du fétichisme comme pratique offrant un potentiel historique créateur. La partie II de l'étude vise à expliquer en détail ce potentiel historique par voie de renvois à des modèles descriptifs marquants de la fiction postmoderne et au moyen d'une lecture approfondie de cinq

auteurs américains contemporains: Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, John Hawkes et Don DeLillo. Chacun des quatre chapitres de la partie II examine la représentation imaginaire du fétichisme dans un cadre théorique différent, en mettant l'accent respectivement sur les aspects suivants: temporalité et objectivité de la théorie de la fiction postmoderne; interrelation de la théorie psychanalytique et du fétichisme féminin dans les romans de Pynchon et Acker; description des pratiques sadomasochistes rituelles dans l'œuvre de Coover et de Hawkes; relation complexe qui existe entre le fétichisme commercial, l'idéologie et la technologie dans l'ouvrage *Underworld* de Don DeLillo. L'étude conclut que la fiction américaine à l'ère du postmodernisme, bien que son adhésion politique aux pratiques fétichistes ne soit pas inébranlable, dépeint le fétichisme comme une stratégie destinée à élaborer de nouvelles formes de conscience historique.

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*The section of Chapter Four entitled "A Myth Beyond the Phallus: Female Fetishism in Acker's Late Novels," appeared in slightly altered form in *Genders* 34 (2001): 22 pars. 19 Sept 2001. <http://www.genders.org/g34/g34_kocela.html>.

A shorter version of the section from Chapter Four entitled "Re-Stenciling Lesbian Fetishism in Pynchon's *V*." is scheduled to appear in the Fall 2002 issue of *Pynchon Notes*.

CONTENTS

Introduction: Fetishism's Historical Revenge	1
PART ONE: FETISHISM AND THEORY	23
Chapter One: Pre-Fetishes: The Epistemological Emphasis in Fetish Theory	24
First Encounters, Multiple Worlds	28
Marx's Second Sight	46
Freud's First Encounter	65
The Epistemological Emphasis Summarized	85
Chapter Two: "Post"-Fetishes: Toward an Ontological Perspective on Fetishism	103
Poststructuralist Fetishes: Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard	108
Postmodern Fetishes: Jameson, Miklitsch, Pels, McCallum	135
From Theory to Fiction	169
PART TWO: FETISHISM AND FICTION	178
Chapter Three: Objectifying Postmodernist Fiction	179
Some Ontologies of Postmodernist Fiction	184
To Assassinate the Object	199
From Theory to Practice	219
Chapter Four: Fictions of the Female Fetish: Pynchon and Acker	226
Re-Stenciling Lesbian Fetishism in Pynchon's <i>V.</i>	231
A Myth Beyond the Phallus: Female Fetishism in Acker's Late Novels	264
Chapter Five: S/M History Unbound: Coover and Hawkes	298
Re-Drawing the "Magic Circle" in Coover's <i>Spanking the Maid</i>	315
Hawkes's Death Drive as S/M <i>Travesty</i>	337
Chapter Six: "Longing on a Large Scale": DeLillo's <i>Underworld</i>	376
"The Game and Its Extensions": Postmodernism's Fantasy Scene	382
Cold War Mythologies and a Fatal Object	400
Conclusion	427
Works Cited	431

INTRODUCTION

FETISHISM'S HISTORICAL REVENGE

Why is it so bad to be a fetishist?

--Sarah Kofman, "Ça Cloche"

Fetishism has always been about history. In its best-known theoretical formulations, the fetish has consistently been portrayed as a false object capable of obscuring or mystifying historical processes. G. W. Hegel, in his *Philosophy of History*, portrayed African religious fetish-worship as the definitive inability to distinguish between the concepts of Spirit and Matter, on which historical understanding depended. Such "primitive" lack of reason excised Africa to a space occupying "no historical part of the world" (99). Karl Marx, in his analysis of capitalist social life, described fetishism as the ability of the commodity to veil from its human producers the history of its production as an object of exchange. For Marx, history proper could begin only once the prehistory of human alienation under capitalism was exposed and overcome. And Sigmund Freud defined the sexual fetish as a "screen memory" of an early, and forgotten, stage of the fetishist's sexual development. Fetishism, for Freud, was proof of the essential role of castration-anxiety in the teleology of human sexuality. Even if fetishism's demonization as a superstitious or irrational practice has curtailed its historical function to the act of forgetting, or to the role of history's dark negative, the fact remains that the fetish has proven crucial to some of the most influential thinking about history in the West.

The treatment of fetishism's relation to history can be explained, to a large extent, by its historical origins as a concept. According to William Pietz, the notion of the fetish

arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, out of a series of symptomatic miscommunications between Portuguese traders and native tribes on the Gold Coast of Africa. Encapsulating and expressing both racial and religious prejudice, fetishism emerged as a problematic whereby Western culture attempted to distance itself from the practices and value systems of a “primitive” culture to which it was nevertheless bound through economic ties. As the embodiment of false value resulting from an improper, superstitious understanding of cause and effect, the fetish was constructed and preserved as the other of Western rationality. It is this fact which both explains and perpetuates fetishism’s “sinister pedigree” (Pietz I, 5)¹ into the last phases of its historical evolution, signified by twentieth century attempts to combine the various disciplinary accounts of fetishism.

In the last few decades, however, we have witnessed the revenge of fetishism against many of the prevailing attitudes of its history as a discourse. For so long the locus of primitive belief, the material embodiment of ideology, or the inappropriate object of sexual desire, the fetish has been struggling to remake itself as the very mirror held up to the aporias and fixations of Western thought. This philosophical turning-of-tables is evident in each those disciplines--sociology, psychology, and anthropology--which have attempted to define and defame fetishism. Jean Baudrillard’s political economy of the sign has famously taken aim at Marx’s discussion of the fetish, and the difference it establishes between the use- and exchange-value of commodities. Reading use-value as itself a reification of human need, Baudrillard argues that “Marxism countersigns the system of values it otherwise dislocates” (*Critique* 89). Naomi Schor,

Emily Apter, and Teresa de Lauretis, among others, have challenged Freud's definition of the fetish as a penis substitute, seeking to reverse the psychoanalytic prohibition of women from perverse sexuality. Their efforts to define female fetishism accuse psychoanalysis of its own fetishistic phallus worship. And from an anthropological perspective, Pietz's history of fetishism has revealed the cross-cultural anxieties underlying some of the most important trends in Enlightenment philosophy. In Pietz's genealogy, the very distinction between disciplines like sociology, anthropology, and psychology arises in part out of positions taken on the emerging discourse of fetishism (II, 23). Viewed together, these trends support the observation made by Apter and Pietz in the introduction to their book, *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, that the fetish has become, in postmodern culture, an important "vehicle for resisting confining essentialisms" (4).

This deconstructive recuperation of fetish theory has not been the only aspect of fetishism's revenge. Attempts to capitalize on the fetish's ability to turn philosophical tables has been accompanied by the question, ever more insistent in recent years, of *affirming* or *valorizing* fetishistic practices. Perhaps the prototype of this question is that posed by Sarah Kofman, which serves as the epigraph of this study. After a reading of Derrida's *Glas*, in which she argues for the possibility of fetishism as an *escape* from, rather than a confirmation of, symbolic castration, Kofman asks, "In short, why is it so bad to be a fetishist?" (119). Occurring on the cusp of fetishism's transition from a poststructuralist kernel of "undecidability" to a postmodernist discourse in its own right, Kofman's question suggests that the full fruition of fetishism's theoretical revenge lies in

the repudiation of its past as a “false” practice. Indeed, that repudiation may necessitate a willingness to take sides with the fetishist, and to view, as objectively as possible, the irrational and the “perverse” through the fetishist’s own eyes.

Of course, this sympathetic impulse is not, in itself, new to fetish theory. Fetish discourse has always betrayed a double perspective of “absorbed credulity and degraded or distanced incredulity” (Pietz I, 14). This “double consciousness” comes about through the theorist’s need to emphasize the distance between him or herself and the practice being described--a need that implicitly acknowledges the fetish’s power to seduce. In his reading of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, W. J. T. Mitchell gives a concise description of this double consciousness as an example of “iconoclasm,” which he defines as follows:

It involves a twofold accusation of folly and vice, epistemological error and moral depravity. The idolater is naive and deluded, the victim of false religion. But the illusion is never simply innocent or harmless; from the iconoclastic point of view it is always a dangerous, vicious mistake that not only destroys the idolater and his tribe, but threatens to destroy the iconoclast as well. (197)

It is this presence of iconoclasm as the “dialectical counterpart” (Mitchell 197) of fetishism in all its forms that makes the revenge of the fetish a constant threat, and one of which, in Mitchell’s opinion, Marx himself was as aware as any of his poststructuralist successors.

Yet even if all discourses about the fetish manifest a certain ambivalence toward their subject--an oscillation between viewing the fetishist as an “object of pity” and an “object of a wrathful judgment” (Mitchell 197)--Kofman’s question can be seen as the impetus for a political debate between “distanced” and “affirmative” perspectives on

fetishism which is, in the historical evolution of the discourse, new. Recently, this has produced two camps regarding the relevance of fetish theory to contemporary history and culture.

In one camp are those theorists who have remained wary of fetishism, keeping an “arm’s-length” hold of the theory even while using it for productive analytical purposes. Laura Mulvey, whose work on fetishism in the cinema has been highly influential, has maintained a consistently critical or distanced orientation toward the fetish. Mulvey reads the fetish as a “metaphor for the displacement of meaning behind representation in history,” and argues the need to combine Freudian and Marxian theories of fetishism so as to decipher contemporary signs and simulacra “before they take over the world” (xiv). For Mulvey, the fetish’s powers of mystification and deception are not up for debate; instead, the value of fetish discourse in the postmodern context resides in its ability to decipher the fetish’s own concealed history, by firmly denying its semiotic play (75). Emphasizing a similar negative take on fetishism, Marcia Ian justifies her reading of psychoanalysis as a genre of literary modernism on the basis that both discourses share the “epistemological fetish” of the Freudian phallic mother--a misogynistic image of self-reflexivity and wholeness (60). This reification of the phallic mother at the heart of modernist discourse becomes, according to Ian, the precursor to academic postmodernism and its dangerous fetishization of discourse, “as if it possesses a power or agency that human agents lack” (x). In the same vein, Jon Stratton’s analysis of “cultural fetishism” argues the need to historicize Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism in relation to both Freudian and Lacanian theories of desire. In Stratton’s view, Marx’s original theory,

structured around the historical moment of production capitalism, fit well with a Freudian model of desire conveying the experience of life in the modern nuclear family (3); but now it must be combined with a Lacanian model if it is to diagnose the more active seduction of the commodity in contemporary culture (31). This is because, according to Stratton, in an age of advertising and the explicit association of commodities with sexual desire, only a Lacanian perspective can account for cultural fetishism as “the institutionalisation of the difference between the individual man’s penis and the cultural phallus which, in light of his experience of the modern state, he comes to feel he should have” (25, emphasis added). Finally, Linda Williams, in her study of the representation of female desire in hardcore pornographic films, also argues for the nuancing of Freud with Marx. In her opinion, Freudian fetishism betrays a sympathy for the fetishist’s perception of “true” female lack which the Marxist theory escapes. It is for this reason that “a Marxian, political analysis of the prior *social* fact of the devaluation of women must always be factored into a discussion of the Freudian fetish” (106). All of these revisions of traditional fetish theory imply that, while the questions it is capable of addressing are larger now than ever before--as testified to by the need for an interdisciplinary approach--primary focus remains on demystifying and deciphering the fetish’s “phantasmatic topography” (Mulvey, *Fetishism* 74).

In the opposite camp, however, is another group of theorists who appear to have taken seriously Kofman’s willingness to embrace the fetish, and have thereby sought to construct more sympathetic approaches to fetishism. Robert Miklitsch, for example, has argued that, in the wake of Adorno and Baudrillard, Marx’s theory of commodity

fetishism as the master figure of alienation no longer serves us in postmodern culture. Unlike Stratton, however, Miklitsch argues for a theory of commodity fetishism that is capable of acknowledging the unique pleasures of contemporary commodity consumption--a theory that is "at once negative and affirmative or, in a word, dialectical" (21). From an anthropological angle, Peter Pels argues that attempts to limit the fetish's essential materiality within discourses of representation deny the fact that "the fetish is not merely a symptom of, but also a challenge to, some of the ways of thinking that characterize the present" (112). Accordingly, he takes as a starting point a "more 'positive' conception of the otherness of the fetish" (97)--a conception which embraces the "actual *danger* posed by talk of the fetish: its threat to overpower human beings by its materiality" (96). Most recently, E. L. McCallum suggests that the possibilities for a "postmodern fetishism" lie in a return to Freud's theory, with the intent of "thinking *through*" rather than "thinking *about*" fetishism (xvi). According to McCallum, the paradigm shift from a "masterful, distant epistemology" of the fetish toward a more sympathetic approach reveals the relevance of fetishism to contemporary theories of identity through fetishism's power to subvert binary models of sexual difference. And we could add to these contributions attempts to see the fetish as an integral part of the formal aspects of contemporary cultural discourses. In the genre of pornography, for example, Berkeley Kaite's treatment of the fetish as an essential "stand-in" for the viewer of the work, emphasizing the fetish's status as a relation which problematizes rather than fortifies demarcations of difference (29), is an important formal alternative to the decoding emphasized by Linda Williams. All of these approaches to the fetish affirm a

willingness to consider its constructive properties or potential. They also imply that the relevance of fetish theory to postmodern cultural forms resides in the recognition that fetishism's revenge against master narratives like those of Marx or Freud enables productive local narratives of identity and consumer practice.

By the terms of this debate, then, the specifically postmodern valences of fetishism's historical revenge appear to depend on the answer one gives to Kofman's question about the "badness" of being a fetishist: that is, fetish discourse retains value today either by reaffirming its ties to the past (especially the modernist past of Marx and Freud), or by further capitalizing on its break from that past. In the former vein, the work of Mulvey and Ian offers a prime example of what Pietz calls the last historical stage of fetish theory, because it encourages the interdisciplinary use of earlier definitions of fetishism and stresses "distanced incredulity" over "absorbed credulity." Ian in particular, with her discussion of fetishism as an essential point of continuity between modernism and postmodernism, constructs a late twentieth century or postmodern model of fetishism very much in keeping with earlier modernist accounts. In the latter vein, however, the work of Miklitsch and McCallum, which challenges the masterful, moralizing impulses of earlier fetish discourse, emphasizes the need for a postmodern theory of fetishism divorced in significant ways from its historical predecessors. This revisionist work suggests a theoretical stage beyond that accounted for in Pietz's genealogy, in which the interdisciplinary combination of previous models gives way to the *valorizing* of affirmative perspectives buried within them. Taken as a whole, then, this opposition places a "postmodern turn" in fetish discourse within well-known debates

about postmodernism's own relation to the modernism which preceded it--debates as yet unresolved about whether or not postmodernism is, in fact, a historical break with, or merely a slightly modified continuation of, modernism.²

Yet I want to argue, through the course of this study, that to limit the postmodern turn in fetish discourse to such an opposition is to take sides, already, with a necessarily distanced perspective on fetishism as a discourse *about* history. This is because, despite the current debate about the affirmation of fetishistic practice, both camps described above have, for the most part, elaborated their arguments on the basis of greater historical *contextualization* of fetish theory. While this historical approach has proven extremely valuable in revealing fetishism's constitutive relation to traditional Western disciplines like psychology and sociology, it has also tended to side with those disciplines in ignoring the corresponding relationship between fetish discourse and history itself. Anne McClintock, one of the few to engage the subject of that relationship directly, describes it as an embarrassment to Enlightenment thought:

Fetishism became a Victorian scandal, in part because it flagrantly rebutted the idea of linear time and progress. The fetish--embodying, as it does, contradiction, repetition, multiple agency and multiple time--exemplifies *repeatable time*: time without progress. Yet by denouncing other fetish cultures as inhabiting a prior moment in the history of progress, Victorian thinkers unwittingly revealed their own fetishistic proclivities. The Great Map of Mankind was a paradox, for it pictured the world as made up of different times that coexist on the same geographical globe. In other words, the anachronistic fetish-lands beyond Europe coexisted in the same time--clock-time--as imperial modernity. Seeing the world as simultaneously inhabiting different time dimensions evoked precisely the fetishistic notion of multiple, discontinuous time that the Enlightenment claimed to have transcended and which it set itself to violently reorder into a global regime of linear time and hierarchical continuity. For this reason, the colonial *mappa mundi* itself recurred ritualistically as a fetish. (188)

McClintock's description of the constitutive relationship between fetishism and Victorian ideas of time and history suggests that any simple incorporation of fetish theory *within* Western models of history involves a necessary downplaying, or distancing, of fetishism's inherent threat to history itself. This threat consists not in the traditional characterization of fetishism as a "forgetting" of history, however, but in the alternative notion of *repeatable* time embodied in the fetish, which is capable of co-existing and competing with Enlightenment rationalism. Indeed, McClintock's provocative reading leads one to believe that perhaps the most successful mystification in the history of fetish discourse has been the performative transformation of this repeatable time from a seductive *alternative* to Western formulations of history, into their dialectical *opposite*--a movement which, according to Derrida, neutralizes and internalizes the fetish's "ahistoricity" within Western speculative logic (*Glas* 207). We need only recall the evolution of the Hegelian fetish, primitive and outside history, into the Marxian commodity, itself an "icon of rational space-time" (Mitchell 196), in order to see this process of incorporation at work. McClintock's description enables one to posit that perhaps the most radical consequence of the postmodern historical turn in fetish theory lies in its attack on history itself as a discourse and a discipline. And in this case, an absorbed approach to fetish theory as a historical discourse would seek to read that postmodern turn as a call to elaborate the fetish's own potential contributions to historical construction and understanding, long buried under dominant assumptions about history as a continuous, linear narrative.

It is to the elaboration of such an absorbed or affirmative perspective on fetishism

that this study is dedicated. It is my hypothesis that the recent postmodern turn in fetish theory signifies, itself, a renewed dissatisfaction with the relationship between fetish discourse and Western thinking about history. But in its present form, that dissatisfaction maps across the problem of postmodern historicity at two levels. At one level, the recent “fetishism of fetishism” discussed above can be seen not only as an intervention in academic debates about postmodernism’s historical/theoretical relationship with modernism (a problem, as we saw above, about continuity/dependence vs. a real historical break), but also as a symptom of the *crisis* of historicity *within* postmodern experience. In the latter case, fetishism as a discourse about history opens onto the problem of what theorists such as Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Andreas Huyssen, and many others have termed the *disappearance* of modernist history within postmodernism. What these writers portray as the contemporary deprivileging of temporal models of understanding, and the corresponding privilege afforded to spatial ones, is reflected implicitly in the urge to revise previous theories of fetishism, which reduced the fetish’s heterogeneous or multiple times into a restrictive linear model.³ To return to McClintock’s example, just as fetishism’s *exclusion* from history became an embarrassment to Victorian mapmakers, who were charged with the representation of multiple time within a single global space, so fetishism’s modernist relegation to the *negative* of history has become unsatisfying because it portrays the fetish as a mystification of a single model of “true” history in which, in the fractured and multiple spaces of the postmodern, we can no longer believe. The contemporary appeal of fetish discourse may thus derive from its power to re-imbue the heterogeneous spaces of

postmodernity--or what Harvey calls postmodernism's "fetishisms of locality, place, or social grouping" (117)--with a sense of historical affect capable of reflecting the heterotopic maps of difference in which the global space of postmodernism is figured.

At this global level of analysis, then, I am in agreement with E. L. McCallum's observation that the contemporary urge to revise fetish theory may reflect, to some extent, the conditions of its historical origins. Quoting Pietz's observations about the birth of the fetish out of a revision of previous religious and philosophical discourses (I, 6), McCallum writes: "If we find ourselves needing to think about fetishism, perhaps this is because history is repeating itself and the current discourses are inadequate for meeting our needs" (xiii). Yet if McCallum is correct, then one source of our present dissatisfaction is history itself, whose "disappearance" within postmodernism has been accompanied by serious questions about its disciplinary status as a narrative distinct from fiction. This is the second level at which fetishism's relation to history and postmodernism can be mapped, and it is here that I advance my second, and, for the purposes of this study, more central hypothesis: contemporary revisions of fetishism make an important contribution to theoretical debates about the status of history and its relation to fictional narrative. In particular, fetishism's basis in desire and repetition, its ties to phantasmatic entities, and its indictment of rigid boundaries offer new ways of measuring and articulating the shrinking distance between history and fiction in the work of prominent historical thinkers like Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans Kellner. At the same time, it is only with reference to these debates about history as a specific form of *narrative*, imbued with necessary ontological, epistemic, and ideological implications

(White, *Content* ix), that an absorbed model of fetishism as a discourse about history can be constructed. That absorbed model, far from reinforcing theoretical distinctions between historical and fictional narratives, however, installs such distinctions only to play across and subvert them. As I shall argue, the decisive move toward an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a discourse about history is the acknowledgement of the fetish's specific historical *truth*, which is its power to construct or order historical narratives. For this reason, I posit that the lesson which emerges from reading revisionist fetish theory in relation to debates about history's narrative status is that the expulsion of fetishism's unique temporality from Western discourses about history has been justified through its "fictionality," or its "magical" ability to connect events in denial of rational models of cause-and-effect. Accordingly, it is my contention that if we begin to consider fetishism's radical historical power as denied from the point of view of historical *theory*, we must also attend, finally, to its affirmation in historical *fiction*--particularly that kind of postmodernist fiction which "deliberately confuses the notion that history's problem is verification, while fiction's is veracity" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 112). Ultimately, if our goal is to reconstruct this magical historical power from an absorbed perspective, we are better served by a sympathetic discourse that practices these disruptions between fiction and history, than by a theoretical discourse that elaborates them "at a distance."

Although I must leave a full justification of this movement from theory to fiction to the unfolding of my argument, I want to give an indication of its general direction now, by way of a word on how this study is organized. My decision to divide this study into two sections, "Fetishism and Theory" and "Fetishism and Fiction," is motivated by an

effort to try and capture the sense of oscillation across terms or boundaries for which the fetish is so well-known. Because fetishism is such a doubled discourse, and so strongly invested in both the production and destabilizing of hierarchical binaries, I have risked presenting, in my Table of Contents, what might appear as a hard distinction between theory and fiction with the hope that my argument about the fetish, and its ability to play across this boundary, will serve in some measure to soften and question it. Furthermore, as that play is both an index of, as well as motivated by, the sub-text of fetishism's historical narrative truth in both theoretical and fictional discourses, I hope that this destabilizing of binary terms will perform a corresponding disruption of hierarchies suggested by the linear structuring of my text. In other words, if my treatment of fetish theory *before* fiction implies a traditional teleology of critical reading, whereby theoretical models are set up in advance to interpret or gloss fictional narratives, I intend to upset that teleology by claiming that fiction is, itself, capable of teaching us as much about fetishism--particularly in its postmodernist affirmative dimension--as previous theories. The movement from theory to fiction should therefore be read not as a rejection of one kind of discourse in favour of another, but rather, as a kind of fetishistic *revisiting* of previous issues seen but unseen, acknowledged but ignored, that shape conventional attitudes about what distinguishes theory from fiction.

Finally, I hope that this oscillation between linear and alternative accounts of fetishism's historicity is to some extent figured in the structural differences between the two parts of my study. In Part One, "Fetishism and Theory," I elaborate a continuous argument spanning two chapters. This argument opens in Chapter One with an

examination of fetishism's roots in a particular form of origin-narrative, then proceeds to an analysis of how this form is perpetuated in the most famous Freudian and Marxian theories of the fetish. Chapter Two presents the problems registered by prominent poststructuralist thinkers concerning these earlier models, and also examines the most recent affirmative theories of fetishism as developments of various poststructuralist trends. My unifying argument throughout Part One is that the liberation of fetishism's buried historicity from within its own evolution as a discourse requires a crucial shift of philosophical perspective on the fetish object as the *basis* of historical narrative. To sum up that movement very briefly, this shift involves recognizing the fetish's status as a historical *trace* with specific ontological implications--implications traditionally ignored or denied in the Western desire to construct fetishism as an epistemological problem centering on the *subject's* misattribution of value. An absorbed model of fetishism, if it is to claim sympathy for the fetishist and the historical potential of his or her temporal perspective, requires a radical shift of focus toward privileging the fetish's *ontological* differences from other objects, and the consequences that such a shift has for the historical narratives in which fetishism has been speculatively interned. My conclusion, finally, is that the shift toward this radical descriptive ontology is one that has not been made--and perhaps cannot be made--by even the most affirmative theories of fetishism. Instead, the best suggestion as to the consequences of this shift for fetish theory are, I argue, to be found in postmodernist fiction, whose distinction from modernist forms is predicated, according to Brian McHale, on a similar shift of philosophical dominant from epistemology to ontology (*Postmodernist* 10-11).

If a single line of argumentation serves to bind the two chapters of Part One into a continuous whole, however, Part Two is deliberately structured so as to provide a counterbalancing sense of multiplicity in historical perspectives on the fetish. Here, while it is the fetish's unique historical ordering power that continues to serve as the link between the various chapters, that theme is pushed *underground*, so to speak, to become the implicit link between my analysis of various recent trends in fetish theory. In Chapter Three I attempt to align an absorbed perspective on fetishism with several of the more prominent characteristics of postmodernist fiction--in particular its interrogation of the nature of historical truth, its presentation of multiple worlds in collision, and its implication, via its ties to the French *nouveau roman*, of the metaleptic potential of objects. Following this, each of the remaining chapters is devoted to analysis of specific authors and texts. The thesis that governs these chapters is that postmodern American fiction, represented by the work of Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, John Hawkes, and Don DeLillo, dramatizes fetishism as a historical practice through its challenge to conventional ideas about the fetish and history. In advancing this thesis, I stand in agreement with Bill Brown when, examining the status of *things* in contemporary American culture, he writes that, "postmodern fiction dreams the things with which to elaborate other histories" (951). Yet the fetish--as the most unique and magical of things--is the mainspring of historical dreams in a manner that differs from author to author, and from text to text. The revisionary histories to which, in postmodernist fiction, the fetish gives rise are never without important political consequences that can be brought to light only through close and careful readings of the

individual texts themselves.

The final three chapters of my study are thus organized around prevalent trends in contemporary fetish theory that best bring to light each author's interrogation of fetishism and history. Chapter Four offers a reading of Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and Kathy Acker's late fiction in the context of recent debates about female fetishism. In very different ways, I argue, the work of Pynchon and Acker challenges the essential relationship between the sexual fetish and the psychoanalytic penis/phallus, offering support for, and enabling extrapolation from, the work of Schor, de Lauretis, and Butler. In Chapter Five I turn my attention toward the literary conventions of S/M narratives, established by Sade and Sacher-Masoch, as a prelude to my analysis of Robert Coover's *Spanking the Maid* and John Hawkes's *Travesty*. Here I argue that the metafictional impulse of the latter two novels foregrounds the constructive historical function of the fetish, while complexifying many of the political and theoretical issues surrounding S/M rituals. Finally, in Chapter Six, I offer a reading of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* in the context of Baudrillard's "fatal theory" and recent discussions of the commodity's "social life" in contemporary American culture. My claim is that DeLillo's novel, by suturing together numerous historical events and trends through the circulation of the Bobby Thomson homerun baseball, provides the most suggestive and all-encompassing picture of fetishism as a historical practice within postmodernism.

In reading these novels, my aim is not simply to reduce them to object texts for contemporary fetish theory. Although I am primarily concerned with examining the work of Pynchon, Acker, Coover, Hawkes, and DeLillo for what it can tell us about fetishism

as historical practice, I also believe that an explication of how fetishism functions in these authors contributes to an understanding of postmodernist fiction in general. Again, justification for this claim must wait for now; but all of my analyses in Part Two are rooted in the conviction that, just as the historical revenge of fetish theory reflects contemporary dissatisfaction with outdated historical models, so the depiction of fetishism as a historical practice in postmodernist fiction reflects and concretizes that discourse's well-known challenge to conventional thinking about history.⁴ As I shall have reason to emphasize again in Chapter Three, however, this does not mean that each of the authors under analysis comes to the same conclusion about fetishism's moral or political significance. Nor, I think, does their presentation of fetishism as a historical practice reveal a distinctly "American" attitude toward fetishism or history. In registering these qualifications, I do not seek to deny the validity of efforts to define historical sensibilities unique to contemporary American culture or fiction, nor do I contest the American-centeredness of much theorizing about postmodernism.⁵ But although all of my authors hail from the United States, not all of them ground their treatment of fetishism in a culture or history that is significantly or even recognizably American. To make sweeping claims about the Americanness of fetishism as a historical practice would prove misleading by implying a consensus that does not exist among these authors regarding how fetishism reconstructs history, why history stands in need of revision or reconstruction, or even what constitutes the boundaries of history as an object of concern. Instead, what I hope will emerge from my discussion of these novels is that, whether through Acker's unique formulation of female fetishism, or through the sadomasochistic

“private apocalypse” of Hawkes’s *Travesty*, each text emphasizes (either explicitly or implicitly) the fetish’s power to construct, influence, and order historical narratives. Ultimately, these fictions are the most sympathetic attempts to trace fetishism’s unique historical truth as a practice capable not only of mystifying history, but of revealing new ways to construct and understand it. Against Robert Stoller’s famous formulation of the fetish as a “story masquerading as an object” (156), postmodern American fiction enables us to see the fetish as the object which makes the historical story possible.

Before proceeding with this study, however, one final word about my effort to affirm the fetish’s historical truth is in order. I began this introduction with a survey of fetishism’s theoretical revenge over the last thirty or so years, speculating on how that revenge relates both to fetishism’s history as a discourse, and to its status as a discourse *about* history. In the process, I suggested that attempts to construct affirmative models of fetishism, if they seek to take sides with the fetishist, must also attempt to reverse or at least question the traditional formulation of the fetish as the object concealing or mystifying historical truth. But my argument about the valences of this reversal or interrogation of historical models with key aspects defining a postmodern historical period could be taken as a reinscription of fetish discourse within the very historical model I am attempting to disrupt. About this I will simply say that an absorbed historical perspective on fetishism will never be able to do away entirely with this particular narrative construction, in part because it is in relation to such a linear model of history that fetishism has always been theorized, and also because it is only against such a distanced perspective on the fetish that its alternative, affirmative perspectives can be

articulated. In this regard, a study of fetishism as a discourse about history does not presume to halt the oscillation between absorbed and distanced perspectives, or speculations, that any discourse on fetishism must manifest. Since ontological questions always depend upon and necessitate the consideration of epistemological ones, so too does the idea of an absorbed, sympathetic perspective on fetishism depend on its distant or critical counterpart. But just as literary discourse, according to Brian McHale, is capable of emphasizing and highlighting which set of questions or terms, whether epistemological or ontological, are asked first of a given fictional text (*Postmodernist* 11), so too are discourses about fetishism capable of privileging, from within, one perspective on the fetish over another. The essential difference between an absorbed perspective on the fetish and the historical trends of fetish theory consists, ultimately, in just such a shift of privilege--from distance to absorption, criticism to affirmation, suspicion to seduction.

Notes

1. William Pietz's three influential essays on fetishism, all published in *Res* and cited hereafter, will be referred to as I, II, and III in the body of the text.
2. The central positions in this debate remain virtually unchanged over the last two decades. Jean-Francois Lyotard's characterization of the postmodern as a historical moment expressing an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (*Postmodern* xxiv) remains extremely popular, particularly among critics of postmodernist fiction. This is in spite of the fact that Lyotard's description of postmodern culture as, ironically, modernism in its "nascent state" (79), or historically *previous* to the modern, problematizes any strict aesthetic or historical divide between the two periods or movements. (In fact, the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between modernism and postmodernism had already been emphasized earlier by Ihab Hassan, in *Paracriticisms* 44, though Hassan has often been taken to task for the rigid binarism of his opposing lists of modernist and postmodernist traits.) In fundamental disagreement with Lyotard from the start has been Jürgen Habermas, who views postmodernism as a neo-conservative break with, and repudiation of, the modernist movement and its claims to an Enlightenment philosophical, scientific and artistic heritage ("Modernity" 12). Habermas attempts to defend the modernist project from postmodern advances; but in this, according to Fredric Jameson, he inadvertently affirms the possibility of returning to a "lost" past (Foreword xvii). For this reason, perhaps, Habermas's vision of a historical break between modernism and postmodernism has been less influential than Jameson's own, in which no such return is possible. Jameson portrays the postmodern and all of its attendant features (a historical "waning of affect," a collapse of distinctions between high and low culture, a privileging of space over time, and a nostalgic recycling of previous aesthetic forms and movements) as the cultural dominant of "late" or multinational capitalism (*Postmodernism* xi-xiii). In this, Jameson is influenced by Jean Baudrillard, whose theoretical "precession of simulacra" establishes as the defining feature of the contemporary its inaccessibility to an outdated Marxian model of political economy (*Symbolic* 31). In the wake of Baudrillard's and Jameson's apocalypticism, however, David Harvey has questioned this concept of a "radical break." In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, he returns via Marxist and post-Marxist theory to a kind of Lyotardian position, portraying the postmodern as a historical and aesthetic crisis *within* the modern (116). For good, comprehensive summaries of postmodernism in theory, see Best and Kellner, and Connor.
3. Indeed, the fetish's origins in what Pietz has called the "abrupt encounter of radically heterogeneous worlds" (I, 6) seem strangely recalled in Jameson's discussion of the "historically original dilemma" of lived experience in postmodern hyperspace:

I take such spatial peculiarities of postmodernism as symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces

of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself. Not even Einsteinian relativity, or the multiple subjective worlds of the older modernists, is capable of giving any kind of adequate figuration to this process [. . .]. (*Postmodernism* 413)

4. Here the historical concomitance of revisionist fetish theory and efforts to define postmodernist fiction is also noteworthy. Both theoretical trends emerge in the early 1980s.
5. For a description of a distinctly American perspective on history tied to Puritan thinking, see Lowenthal 109-20. Geoffrey Lord distinguishes between various general traits of American and British postmodernist fiction in his study *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference*. For a list of earlier critical discussions of postmodernism as an American aesthetic, see Lord 10-11. An interesting explanation of the “prevalence of allegorical form” in American literature, which extends back to Hawthorne and his representation of the object, is provided in Cohen 36-37.

PART ONE

FETISHISM AND THEORY

CHAPTER ONE
PRE-FETISHES:
THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL EMPHASIS IN FETISH THEORY

*That things exhaust themselves in their spectacle--
in a magic and artificial fetishism--
is the distortion that serious minds will always oppose.*
--Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*

This study begins with a consideration of fetishism as a historical narrative. My preliminary object is to investigate how the mystification of *value* inherent in fetishism becomes embodied in a particular narrative form. Although fetishism is often overlooked as a historical, teleological, or narrative problem, it serves in many ways as the formal basis of the modern Western origin story, as Donna Haraway points out: “An origin story in the ‘Western,’ humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism” (151). Both Marx and Freud famously define and decode the fetish’s magic through a narrative reconstruction of its origins. Yet in doing so, they hone to a new degree of sophistication a narrative strategy for distancing and degrading fetishistic practice which is as old as the philosophical concept of fetishism itself. That narrative strategy, embodied in what anthropologist William Pietz calls the “first encounter theory,” emerges in the earliest attempts by Dutch merchants to explain the “superstitious” practice of African fetishism. Already in these early models, as we shall see, the reduction of the fetish’s magic to a false understanding of cause and effect reveals how an emphasis on origins is used to deny the fetish’s purported power to construct historical narratives. On the basis of interpreting origins, the fetish is

constrained to a representation of false *value* and cast as dangerously outside Western models of causal and historical relations.

In analyzing, via Pietz, this early narrative configuration of fetishism, I intend to focus on how it embodies specific historiographic and ontological assumptions that ground its privileging of a “distanced” or critical (as opposed to “absorbed” or sympathetic) perspective on fetishistic practices. The first-encounter theory, I maintain, explains and demonizes the practice of fetishism only after implicitly neutralizing the ontological and historiographic threat which that practice poses to emergent Western models of history. Utilizing the work of historians such as Hayden White, Robert Frykenberg, and Paul Ricoeur, as well as possible worlds theorists like Thomas Pavel, Brian McHale, and Andrew Blais, I will suggest that the fetish’s threat resides in its encouragement of an ontological orientation toward the affirmation of multiple and conflicting worlds, each with its own distinct reality and historical truth. The first encounter theory, as a special form of historical narrative, ensures that the concept *fetish* comes into being in Western thought only after having already been foreclosed as fundamentally “outside” that philosophical and historical tradition.

After analyzing fetishism’s historical origins, I shall then examine the theories of Marx and Freud, paying special attention to the manner in which each defines fetishism as a subversion of historical awareness and “natural” teleology. My hypothesis about these two narratives, following the analysis of the historical first-encounter theory, is that Marx and Freud privilege an epistemological approach to the fetish as a historical object. By this I mean that they rely upon, and fortify, earlier Western strategies for privileging

the distanced perspective on fetishism as a problem of the subjective misattribution of value, while downplaying the fetish's ontological threat. Yet by rendering the fetish a privileged embodiment of the values on which their economic and symbolic systems turn (exchange-value in Marx, castration-anxiety in Freud), these modern upgrades of the historical first-encounter theory also restore to the fetish some of the magic stripped from it by earlier iconoclastic definitions. It is the simultaneous affirmation and denial of the fetish's material influence over the fetishist that has occasioned its historical revenge in recent years, and which, I contend, enables one to read the Marxian and Freudian theories of fetishism as a *disavowal* (in the psychoanalytic sense) of the fetish's ability to *stand for* history.

In support of this hypothesis, I shall read Marx and Freud in light of critical commentaries which have discussed their theories of fetishism as narratives with special historical and temporal implications. Both theories depend upon a narrative enactment of what I am calling the "second sight"--a term I choose deliberately for its connotations of the supernatural. Marx and Freud describe the fetish's particular magic only after the fetish is first portrayed as a natural or non-magical object under an ideal, objective gaze. The purpose of introducing and performatively "forgetting" this pre-fetish object is, I contend, to instill an interpretive prejudice regarding the fetish: it is an object whose magic stems only from the subjective imputation of *value* to it, rather than from its material and/or ontological difference from other objects. First and second views of the fetish subtly implicate the fetish within two temporal/ historical movements: one *forward* movement, defined as a series of successive, enumerated "snapshots" of the object which

(one presumes) would remain the same in the eyes of an *objective, disinterested* viewer; and a second *reverse* movement, in which each vision of the fetish seems a new “first” appearance by virtue of a *subjective excess of interest*. The characterization of the two historical movements of fetishism in terms of disinterest and excessive interest charges fetishism’s dual perspectives (those of the theorist and fetishist, respectively) with differing historical potential. Through various rhetorical strategies, however, that relationship of *difference* is transformed into one of *opposition*. In both Marx and Freud, the forward temporal movement, viewed from the distanced, theoretical perspective, is valorized as that which corresponds to true or normal historical development, while the fetishistic perspective is relegated to the realm of mystification or fantasy.

In diagnosing this narrative effect in Freud and Marx, my aim is not simply to point out how such an opposition of true to false history comes about, nor to reiterate the common observation that fetish discourse is inherently destructive of binary oppositions. Instead, by attempting to characterize the strategies at the root of the epistemological privileging of fetishism’s distanced historical dimension, I hope to gain insight into how one might go about privileging fetishism’s counterbalancing absorbed historical ordering power from within these theories. My governing assumption is that, if fetish theory is, following Pietz, an essentially narrative discourse, and if the truth of that discourse has traditionally been defined through a narrative form which foregrounds an epistemological emphasis on the fetish’s origins as a *sign*, then the fullest implications of the fetish’s revenge on its own history as a discourse lies with an *ontological* orientation toward its magical or threatening *materiality*, which partially thwarts the search for origins. Toward

the end of this chapter, I posit a provisional outline of what an ontological emphasis on fetishism as a discourse about history might entail in narrative terms.

In the course of my speculations about this absorbed historical perspective, I shall point to alternative models of history advanced by Hans Kellner, John Frow, and Jonathan Dollimore, among others. Although I do not develop any lengthy argument about the value of these models, I recommend them as examples that demonstrate how history can be constructed in narrative terms that differ from traditional linear representations. It is with an open mind to these alternatives that one is best able to appreciate the potentially constructive consequences of fetishism's historical revenge, which I examine in Chapter Two.

First Encounters, Multiple Worlds

William Pietz's articles on the history of fetishism as a concept trace its origins to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the Gold Coast of Africa, in a series of cross-cultural miscommunications between Portuguese traders and native tribes, the fetish was born as a revision of earlier Western discourses about idol worship and witchcraft. From there, the fetish evolved as a problematic of religious overtones in Kant and Hegel, before branching into its better known manifestations in Marxist social theory and psychoanalysis.

Pietz's work focuses primarily on the earliest stage of this evolution, prior to the emergence of the fetish as a philosophical concept in Kant. For Pietz, all of the essential themes of fetish discourse are already recognizable in this "pre-fetish" stage of history, in

the narratives written by Western merchants about their trade interactions with African natives. A close examination of these narratives reveals, according to Pietz, four recurrent themes of fetish theory: 1) the overvaluation of fetishes as “quasi-personal powers and material objects,” 2) the fetish’s “radical historicity,” 3) the fetish’s “relation to a particular social order,” and 4) the “distinctive relation of the fetish object to the embodied self of its worshipper” (II, 40-44). Out of these four recurring themes Pietz distils the four essential aspects of his general analytical theory of the fetish: territorialization, historicization, reification, and personalization.

Given the influence of Pietz’s general theory on more recent discussions of fetishism, and the frequency with which its four central terms are employed, it is worthwhile to explain them briefly. By *territorialization* Pietz refers to the process whereby the fetish accretes in material space, either as a geographic locality, a site on the human body, or some other medium of inscription or configuration. This process accounts for the essential materiality of the fetish, the fact that “the fetish is precisely *not* a material signifier referring beyond itself, but acts as a material space gathering an otherwise unconnected multiplicity into the unity of its enduring singularity” (I, 15).

Historicization then refers to the role of the material fetish in embodying an original and unrepeatable fixating encounter, at which an indefinable transaction takes place between the self and otherness of the world. Here the fetish becomes a historical object both through its origin, and through its ability to repeat the effect of this first fixation in the fetishist (II, 23). The third aspect of Pietz’s general theory, *reification*, provides a formal account of the means by which the fetish object emerges as a self-contained entity within

the territorial field. Here the recurring issue of social value in fetish discourse is generalized as “the dependence of the fetish for its meaning and value on a particular order of social relations, which it in turn reenforces” (II, 23). Finally, *personalization* describes the influence of the fetish on individual desires and actions, by virtue of its “power to fix identifications and disavowals that ground the self-identity of particular, concrete individuals” (I, 15).

Because he constructs his general theory of fetishism on the basis of disparate documentary trade narratives, Pietz can be accused of creating historical and philosophical origins for fetishism whose coherence is perceivable only in hindsight (an idea I shall return to often in this chapter).¹ Yet Pietz attributes the ready visibility of his four essential themes to the conformity in narrative presentation and description demonstrated by the historical documents he analyzes. Indeed, this high degree of conformity leads him to comment at length on the emergence of a particular narrative form, which he calls the “first-encounter theory,” devoted to explaining the “superstitious” African practice that would soon become known as fetishism. As old as the concept of the fetish itself, then, this narrative form is inseparable from the fetish’s legacy in Western philosophical discourses. It has also played a formative role in the conflation of false *value* with false *history* where the fetish is concerned.

Pietz describes the first-encounter theory as a genre which arose out of the need of Western merchants to explain the “trifling value” attributed to everyday objects by Africans. Within these theories, the fetish’s magic was consistently identified with the novelty attributed to the fetish object by its worshipper--a novelty arising out of a sudden

new perspective on a previously mundane thing, which set it apart from other objects. Western merchants explained this novelty by deferring to--but also re-interpreting--the fetishists' own stories about how their fetishes came into being. Typically, as Pietz writes, these stories were "elaborated in terms of the chance conjuncture of a momentary desire or purpose and some random object brought to the desirer's attention" (II, 43). Though Pietz gives several examples of this type of narrative, he defines its "classic statement" as a story presented, in 1703, in William Bosman's first definition of the fetish:

He [Bosman's principal African informant] obliged me with the following Answer, that the number of their Gods was endless and innumerable: For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake any thing of Importance, we first of all search out a God to prosper our designed Undertaking; and going out of Doors with this design, take the first Creature that presents itself to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat, or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any Inanimate that falls in our way, whether a Stone, a piece of Wood, or any Thing else of the same Nature. (Bosman 367a, quoted in Pietz II, 43)

Retold from the perspective of the Western merchant/historian, the story of the fetish's origins emphasized contingency and arbitrariness, and threw further doubt on the already suspicious value attributed to the fetish. As a result, first-encounter theories became an important basis for characterizing African thinking as rooted in individual caprice rather than social law (Pietz II, 42-43). They also marked the emergence of fetish discourse's definitive "doubled perspective" of scepticism and belief, incorporating in a theoretical framework the fetishist's own origin-narrative, retold and interpreted by the theorist.²

Furthermore, I would add that these early theories bring to light the subtle strategy whereby Western philosophical discourses have traditionally privileged the distanced

perspective on fetishism as a practice with historical potential. As I shall elaborate in greater detail in my reading of Marx and Freud, this strategy is two-fold, and involves, first, a treatment of the fetish's temporality in terms of *value* or *meaning*, and second (as the retrospective enabling condition of the first aspect), an ontological *levelling* of the fetish to the status of any generic, material object. These two strategic maneuvers serve to deny the fetish's uniqueness and magic on epistemological grounds, while simultaneously translating the "truth" of the fetish's origins (from the fetishist's perspective) into a case of interpretive error or *misreading*.

Consider Hegel's presentation, over a century later, of ideas developed in earlier first encounter theories. Note that the suggestion of the fetish's "objective independence" is immediately recuperated as individual "fancy" and "projection":

What they [the Africans] conceive of as the power in question, is therefore nothing really objective, having a substantial being and different from themselves, but the first thing that comes in their way. This, taken quite indiscriminately, they exalt to the dignity of a "Genius"; it may be an animal, a tree, a stone, or a wooden figure. [. . .] Here, in the Fetich, a kind of objective independence as contrasted with the arbitrary fancy of the individual seems to manifest itself; but as the objectivity is nothing other than the fancy of the individual projecting itself into space, the human individuality remains master of the image it has adopted. (94)

Hegel's reading of fetishism is crucial in justifying his placement of Africa, as a continent, outside the boundaries of World History:

[I]t [Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it--that is in its northern part--belong to the Asiatic or European World. [. . .] What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which has to be presented here as on the threshold of the World's History. (99)

Of course, Hegel is not alone in defining fetishist practices as unhistorical. Marx, as we

shall see, locates the fetishism of commodities in their ability to *conceal* the historical origins and nature of their production. And for Freud, the fetish stands as both a reminder and a denial of the young boy's first sight of his mother's genitals--a historical event replaced by the fetishist's "screen memory" of his initial interaction with the already-constituted fetish.³ As a result, fetishism has become philosophically and historically synonymous with *forgetting*. In W. J. T. Mitchell's words:

The idolater has "forgotten" something--his own act of projection--and thus he must be cured by memory and historical consciousness. The iconoclast sees himself at a historical distance from the idolater, working from a more "advanced" or "developed" stage in human evolution, therefore in a position to provide a euhemeristic, historicizing interpretation of myths taken literally by the idolater. (197)

The critical or moralizing perspective in fetish discourses is borne of the theorist's need to illuminate precisely what has been forgotten by the fetishist, and why. In order to fulfill this function, the theorist must stand at both a historical and philosophical distance from the fetishist, reducing the fetish's magic to false value, and denying its objective difference from other objects.

In the earliest first-encounter theories, the reduction of the fetish's historical potential to a problematic of false value is revealed in the fact that the African fetishist's narrative of origins, and its "explanation" of the fetish's magic, was subsumed and re-interpreted not only within the framework of the incredulous Western historian, but also within another historical first encounter. This second historical origin was the moment in which Africans first came into contact with the objects brought by Dutch traders to the Gold Coast. As Pietz suggests, the first-encounter theory was historically tied to anecdotes told by Dutch merchants about the Africans' attribution of wondrous powers to

navigational and other technological equipment. After describing an incident documented in the fifteenth century voyage account of Cadamosto, a Venetian merchant, in which is described the tendency of Africans to personify objects ranging from ships to compasses, Pietz writes:

Here is the first appearance in European voyage accounts of a figure of thought and type of argument that has ever since been employed to explain the primitiveness of the primitive and his difference from the civilized man: the African's ignorance of certain technology (later ideologized as the lack of scientific mentality) leads to a false perception of causality [. . .]. In the discourse about fetishes, this impression of the primitive's propensity to personify technological objects--or to regard them as vehicles of a supernatural causality--becomes conjoined to the mercantile perception that the non-European gives false values to material objects. The superstitious misunderstanding of *causality* is understood to explain the false estimation of the *value* of material objects. From this developed a general discourse about the superstitiousness of non-Europeans within a characteristically modern rhetoric of realism, which recognized as "real" only technological and commercial values. (II, 42)

The "rhetoric of realism" described by Pietz emphasized a particular understanding of technological objects, and objects of economic value, which became the standard of scientific causality. Singular events, or events rendered incomparable in relation to the discourses of science or economic exchange, were excised from the domain of the rational and the real, or else incorporated only as problems of *false* value, where falsity was attributed to the ignorance of the subject. In the early history of fetish theory, the genuine historical novelty (from the Africans' perspective) of the technological objects brought by the Dutch traders, and the Africans' failed interpretation (from the traders' perspective) of these objects, became the frames within which the fetishist's narrative of origins was contained and delegitimized.

Of course, the Western glossing of African first-encounter stories is not unique to

the first-encounter theory, but indicates broader historiographic shifts occurring around this time. The narratives of these early Dutch merchants show evidence of the process whereby, according to Hayden White, a pre-Enlightenment, ethnographic historiography evolved into the scientific, rationalistic historiography of the Enlightenment. What enabled this evolution was the fact that both pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment models were founded on a representation of history as a field of opposing forces. In the pre-Enlightenment model, according to White, this opposition was the basis of an “historiography of essential schism” read in ethnographic terms:

The historiography of the seventeenth century began with an apprehension of the historical field as a chaos of *contending* forces, among which the historian had to choose and in the service of one or more of which he had to write his history. This was the case with both the confessional historiography of the seventeenth century and Ethnographic historiography of the missionaries and *conquistadores*. (*Metahistory* 65)

The transition to Enlightened models of historiography was, in part, effected by the decision to *read* this ethnographic opposition in terms of rational cause and effect. As White points out, this generated the *philosophical* model of historiography:

Dominated by a conception of rationalism derived from the (Newtonian) physical sciences, the *philosophes* approached the historical field as a ground of cause-effect relationships, the causes in question being generally conceived to be the forces of reason and unreason, the effects of which were generally conceived to be enlightened men on the one hand and superstitious or ignorant men on the other. (*Metahistory* 65)

The first-encounter theories analyzed by Pietz suggest just how essential the emerging discourse of fetishism was to this shift in historiographic models. The Dutch narratives demonstrate how a new discourse about material objects and their *values* enabled the choice between conflicting historical viewpoints, endemic to the Ethnographic model of

historiography, to be rationally justified through scientific explanations of cause and effect. Multiple historical perspectives, which implied the possibility of multiple histories and even threatened, as White points out, the possible end of civilization (*Metahistory* 59), could be internalized within a universal history whose unifying perspective was no longer that of God, but of science and market exchange.

The preservation (or institution) of a rational, universal history also demanded assurances that there was only one *world* to which history corresponded. Here again, the Dutch merchants' reduction of African practices to a subjective misattribution of value reflects the effort to safeguard the emergent Enlightenment notion of a single, epistemologically knowable world and history. As Pietz suggests, the first-encounter theories of fetishism were "novel productions resulting from the abrupt encounter of radically heterogeneous *worlds*" (I, 6, emphasis added). The rhetoric of realism which these narratives exemplify thus involves the levelling of difference between heterogeneous *worlds* into a problem of heterogeneous *values*. According to Anne McClintock, it was the rationalistic need for one (and only one) world that eventually produced the colonial map as a kind of reactionary eighteenth-century Western fetish (188). To secure the borders of that map required that there be only one narratable history of the world; therefore, outlying colonial territories and histories (in particular the history of first encounters between central and peripheral territories) were incorporated within a single cartographic and historical frame.

The Western strategy for preserving the integrity of a Eurocentric world (best exemplified by Hegel's historical and geographic "othering" of Africa) has important

ontological consequences. The effort to deny the validity of the African perspective on the value of objects (whether technological or fetishized) is a reflection of what possible worlds theorist Thomas Pavel describes as the ontological *focalizing* that can occur when different worlds come in contact with one another:

If most societies seem to accommodate, or at least to authorize, some diversity in the ontological landscape, there still remain means to indicate that only one of those landscapes represents the world proper. Competition between neighbouring landscapes leads to a process of ontological focalization, to a sorting out and ordering of the worlds in place.⁴ (139)

Clearly, the emergence of fetish theory occurred at a time characterized, in the West, by a substantial degree of hostility toward “diversity in the ontological landscape.” The concept of fetishism, as the result of a historical collision between worlds, can therefore be interpreted (despite its theoretical pretensions to *remember* lost origins) as a philosophical effort to deny the conditions of its own formation. In this context, the site of ontological focalization was the fetish object itself.

Denial of the existence of multiple worlds, and multiple historical truths, was carried out on the material reality of the fetish itself as it was apprehended by Western epistemology. Recall that, for Pietz, the first theme of early fetish theory is *territorialization*, in which the fetish’s “untranscended materiality” (I, 7) enables it to act as a material space on which multiplicity and heterogeneity become grafted into a new unity. Pietz is explicit about the fact that the fetish does not *signify* beyond itself. The moment of fetish-formation is “stripped of all symbolic value” because no adequate formal code can be found to express it in a coherent narrative form (I, 13); thus the fetish takes the place of that absent narrative, becoming a historical object or “enduring material

form and force of an unrepeatable event” (12). Indeed, the essential, non-signifying materiality of the fetish has been seized upon by theorists attempting to perpetuate the fetish’s revenge against the narratives and discourses in which it has been historically confined.⁵ Yet as Pietz also points out, the fetish’s material uniqueness is perceivable only by the fetishist him or herself. In other words, the fetish’s untranscended materiality--in which its ontological difference from all other objects resides--is a property definitive of the absorbed or affirmative perspective on the fetish. For the fetishist, the fetish’s truth is its material existence as a paradoxical, singular testament to heterogeneity, multiplicity and difference. But for the Western theorist of fetishism, who views such heterogeneity with distrust and suspicion, the fetish’s *territorialization* takes on a very different meaning--or, to put it another way, it takes on *meaning*, period. By incorporating the African fetishist’s narrative of fetish-formation within the framework of the Africans’ first encounter with Western technology, the earliest theories of fetishism, I suggest, establish an ontological equivalence between the “primitive” fetish object and its narrative counterpart, the Western technological object. Narratives of fetish-formation, which center on the fetish’s novelty for the individual fetishist, enter the historical record via the story of Africa’s first encounter with new technological objects brought by the Dutch merchants. But because that encounter is *already* defined, from the Western perspective, as a misunderstanding on the part of the African people (a failure, on their part, to perceive the true origins of technological objects in a science that is unavailable to them), the African perspective on the historical novelty of the fetish, which affirms its magical *difference* from mundane objects, becomes the limit-boundary of a rational

(single) world-view. Even though history records a legitimately new encounter between two radically different cultures, two radically different *worlds*, the ontological integrity of a one-world, one-history model is retained by retroactively defining one of these world-perspectives as nothing more than the dark “negative” or outside of the other.⁶

Already, then, we can see the emergence of a Western epistemological perspective which seeks to deny the existence of multiple histories based on the denial of multiple *perspectives* or multiple *worlds*--a levelling of categories based on the refusal to register the uniqueness (whether historical or ontological) of the fetish object. The African practice of fetishism suggests a radically different way of appreciating the demarcation of difference between types of material objects (and types of cultures) than that expressed by the Dutch traders;⁷ but the incorporation of that practice within a rhetoric of scientific realism reduces it to nothing more than a subjective misattribution of value, or simple epistemological error. Against the African perspective on the fetish object, which, one is tempted to say, *appreciates* its ontological distinctness from other categories of objects, the Dutch history-writers and merchants institute an early-Enlightenment rationality which seeks to level and “territorialize” such ontological plurality for a singular scientific and historical empire.

This is not to suggest that the early African perspective on the fetish object, which is available to us now only through the narratives of the Dutch merchants, is an ontological one in the metaphysical sense that it provides logical premises by which to ground existence or reality. Rather, when I speak of ontology here, it is in recognition of the most radical thesis sustained by the African reaction to technological objects: the

thesis that history was indeed, as feared by pre-Enlightenment historians, defined by ongoing collisions among separate and unique worlds. In this historiographic context, ontology can be taken to refer to the *acknowledgement* and *description* of worlds in the plural. Brian McHale, building upon Pavel's concept of a "descriptive ontology" (141) in possible worlds theory, argues that narrative discourses are capable of privileging which mode of questioning, either ontological or epistemological, is most relevant to analyzing and understanding them. According to McHale, discourses with an ontological *dominant* (such as postmodernist fiction) foreground the description of multiple worlds or realities in collision, while placing in the background considerations of how those descriptions are authorized or verified. Discourses with an epistemological dominant (such as modernist fiction, in McHale's view) do the reverse: they background descriptive ontologies in favour of questions about the nature of knowledge, its accessibility and reliability (*Postmodernist* 6-11). To be sure, the African perspective in early fetish theory is not a fully-developed descriptive ontology in the sense described by Pavel or McHale. But given that the first encounter theory of fetishism *is* an essentially narrative discourse, McHale's classificatory schema enables the supposition that, precisely because the ontological implications of the African perspective are *deprivileged* within that discourse, its dominant is epistemological. The narrative strategies whereby the Dutch merchants incorporate and delegitimize the African description of the fetish's origins demonstrate the rhetorical backgrounding of descriptive ontologies that would unsettle single-world models of reality and history. With the acknowledgement that this classification will require further proof, we might say that the two perspectives in fetish theory (distanced

and absorbed) can be characterized, at least in their earliest narrative incarnations, by their epistemological and ontological orientation, respectively.

In making this classification, however, I want to emphasize again that to speak of the epistemological dominant of the first encounter narrative is not to suggest that the Dutch merchants' perspective is free of ontological implications. As I have already suggested, their historical viewpoint was grounded in the assumption of the reality of *one* world with *one* history. But by framing the encounter between heterogeneous belief systems in terms of a failure of *understanding*, rather than an acknowledgement of *difference*, the Dutch merchant/historians wrote narratives with a fundamentally epistemological emphasis. At the heart of this narrative strategy was an effort to shield the emerging bases of Enlightenment thought from the ontological threat posed implicitly by the African classification of material objects. For the Africans, technological objects and fetishes embodied, in different ways, an implicit belief in multiplicity and incommensurability *in the object world*. For the merchants themselves, multiplicity became a problem of perspectives on objects, or of subjective attribution, which we find more fully articulated in later theories of fetishism.

To make a provisional distinction between the distanced and absorbed perspectives on fetishism in terms of their epistemological and ontological orientation is not, therefore, to erect a rigid philosophical binarism at the heart of fetish theory. Instead, the distinction enables the supposition that, if traditional theories of fetishism, which demonize the fetish as unhistorical, manifest an epistemological narrative dominant, then perhaps a "vengeful" narrative theory of the fetish, willing to affirm the fetish's

constructive historical potential, will be defined by its ontological dominant. The question then remains as to how the ontological perspective on the fetish, interned and delegitimized within traditional fetish theory, can be liberated and reconstructed.

Part of the answer to this question has already been revealed in the analysis of the first encounter theory. The earliest narratives of fetishism symptomatically suggest several features that might define an absorbed, affirmative, or ontological orientation to the fetish: a willingness to acknowledge the fetish's essential uniqueness and categorical difference from other objects; an acknowledgement that the fetish embodies, through its "untranscended materiality," the interconnection between multiple worlds and multiple historical truths; and a refusal to limit or explain away the fetish's magical historical ordering power (its "radical historicity") as simple *forgetting*. Some of these features reflect philosophical and historical arguments that lend further support to the association I am drawing between an ontological approach to the fetish object, and an affirmation of fetishism's historical potential.

In a recent contribution to debates about possible worlds, Andrew L. Blais argues that the distinction between single- and multiple-world metaphysical models depends on a shift in how one views the object. Against the claim of metaphysical *realists* that there is only one complete world, and therefore one time, which contains all objects, metaphysical *relativists* (of which Blais is one) define the ontology of a world as "all that exists within a time," and define time as a purposive relationship between subjects and objects. Because there are numerous possible subject-object relationships, there are numerous possible histories and worlds.⁸ Blais's argument suggests that Bosman's

African fetishist, for whom the object's magic was the result of a decision to "undertake any thing of Importance," was an implicit metaphysical relativist. In this framework, the fetishist's *purposive* perspective on the fetish is inherently conducive to the affirmation of multiple worlds.⁹

Furthermore, the affirmation of the fetish's untranscended materiality can be theorized in relation to Paul Ricoeur's concept of the historical *trace*. According to Ricoeur, historiography and the philosophy of history are distinguished by their respective epistemological and ontological modes of questioning. Historians rely on an essentially "realist" hypothesis that the historical document or archive plays the role of a *connector* which "reinscribes the time of narrative within the time of the universe" (100). Philosophers of history, on the other hand, concern themselves with the ontological root of such connectors, which Ricoeur calls the historical trace:

For historical knowledge, the notion of a trace constitutes a sort of terminus in the series of references that leads back from archives to documents to the trace. Ordinarily, such knowledge does not linger over the enigma of this historical reference with its essentially indirect character. For historical knowledge, the ontological question, implicitly contained in the notion of the trace, is immediately covered over by the epistemological question relating to the document, that is, to its value as a warrant, a basis, a proof in explaining the past. (143)

To examine the ontology of the trace, any historical document will suffice; but, for Ricoeur, those with an obvious materiality (such as fossils, ruins, and monuments) most clearly exemplify the trace's constitution as a "sign-effect"--an intermingling of signifying capability and teleological cause-and-effect embodied in material form (184). Ultimately, in Ricoeur's view, if historians restrict their use of the historical trace to its signifying function or *value* in explaining the past, philosophers must concern themselves

with the neglected ontology of the trace as it resides within the materiality of the historical document or connector. Read in the context of fetish theory, Ricoeur's work supports my hypothesis that an absorbed perspective on fetishism, which affirms the object's magical materiality, is a fundamentally ontological perspective. To attempt to construct an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a historical practice demands acknowledgement of that aspect of the fetish (its untranscended materiality) which enables it serve as a unique *connector* among multiple times and multiple worlds. It is precisely this aspect of the fetish's constitution that is deprivileged in the epistemological rhetoric of realism that governs the historical first encounter theory.

Yet neither Blais nor Ricoeur offers much that would indicate what an affirmative, ontological perspective on fetishism might look like translated into narrative form. If the historical and philosophical truth of fetishism is essentially narrative in nature, as Pietz's work suggests, then the affirmation of a non-traditional perspective on fetishism as a constructive historical practice resides in telling new kinds of stories about it. Here another clarification is in order. I have advanced the thesis that the distanced, epistemological perspective in fetish discourse denies the fetish's radical historicity by overwriting its distinctive materiality, and ontological singularity, with a problematic of *value*. I have also suggested that, to reconstruct a philosophical counterpart to this perspective demands, in some sense, undoing the epistemological interpretation of the fetish in order to recuperate that "lost" materiality. Yet as I hope my emphasis on descriptive ontologies within possible worlds theory has made clear, the ontological orientation toward the fetish does not seek to *represent* the fetish's non-signifying or

unrepresentable materiality, even if that were possible. Since Pietz is very clear about the fact that the fetish's threatening materiality is defined by its inability to be contained in any single narrative form, my aim is not to try and find a better or more accurate narrative *rendering* of this materiality. That fetishes have an existence in some sense "outside" the narratives which explain or define them is not a fact I wish to contest; nor is it an issue that concerns me for the purposes of this study.¹⁰ Rather, in speaking of epistemological denials, or ontological affirmations, of the fetish's materiality, I am concerned with assessing how the dual perspective within fetish discourse, transformed into these (as yet provisional) philosophical orientations, influences or grounds alternate ways of plotting fetishism's relation to history and historical awareness. Since historical narratives, unlike the fetish (perhaps), *are* confined to the semiotic realm, another way of framing this problem is by considering how each philosophical perspective structures itself around the unrepresentable narrative "gap" of the fetish's materiality.

To tackle this problem, it is necessary to examine in greater detail the narrative features which characterize distanced, epistemological perspectives on fetishism. In the remainder of this chapter, therefore, I shall examine the two most famous theories of fetishism--those of Marx and Freud--to assess how, in these incarnations, the treatment of the fetish as a problem of *value*, and the denial of the fetish's ontological difference from other objects, constrains fetishism to a practice of forgetting. This analysis will enable me to strengthen my assertion that the difference between distanced and absorbed perspectives in first-encounter narratives of fetishism can be mapped across a distinction between epistemological and ontological orientations toward the fetish. It will also reveal

additional symptomatic features of the absorbed historical perspective.

Marx's Second Sight

Marx's theory of fetishism is a good place to begin an analysis of what I am calling the epistemological emphasis in fetish theory for three reasons. First, it is the model most clearly related to a construction of historical awareness. Commodity fetishism, for Marx, is a phenomenon and a practice which conceals both the process of how commodities are endowed with value in society, as well as the historical lineage of social forms which have led to its prominence. Second, relative to Freud, Marx's theory is the one which most clearly condemns the fetishist. Although the notion of fetishism as a perversion is usually associated with sexual deviance, and hence indirectly with Freudian theory, it is Marx who is "most inclined to employ *fetishism* as a term of old-fashioned, moralizing abuse" (Williams, *Hard Core* 105). Third, and finally, it is against Marxian theory that the fetish has taken its most potent revenge. Beginning with Baudrillard, and supported by the work of Mitchell and Miklitsch, among others, fetishism has set itself against the Marxian analysis that sought to use it as a term for condemning and supplanting the deluded ideals of bourgeois society.

Having said this, however, it is important to note that Marx's theory of fetishism is not a first-encounter narrative in the sense that, like those analyzed by Pietz or that of Freud, it attempts to explain the fetish through reference to a single fixating encounter for the fetishist. Marx is more concerned with the effect of the absorbed or credulous perspective as it characterizes all of bourgeois social and economic analysis, and

therefore less so with the problem of the individual overvaluation of objects.

Nevertheless, Marx's theory is an origin-story on two levels, corresponding to what Hayden White and Slavoj Žižek, in different registers, have called the fetish's *form* and *content*. And I shall argue that it is the relation between these doubled origin stories that aids us in characterizing the epistemological emphasis in fetishism as that which denies the fetish's constructive historical potential.

Marx outlines his theory of commodity fetishism near the beginning of the first volume of *Capital*, in a section entitled "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof." According to Marx, fetishism names the process whereby a commodity becomes a "mysterious thing" through its ability to veil the specific social character of human labour (72). This veiling or mystification is explained through an analysis of the two forms of value invested in all commodities: one pertaining to its *usefulness* as an object, and the other expressing its *exchangeability* for other commodities.

An object's *use-value* stems from its capability to suit the needs of humankind, insofar as those needs have guided the object's fashioning from natural materials. For Marx, use-value is a necessary, unique, and non-comparable trait: every object is fashioned for a specific purpose. Furthermore, this shaping of natural materials to suit human need is itself a natural process, imparting no magic or mystery to the object on which the labour is expended: "So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour" (71). Although use-value involves a refashioning of natural materials

toward human ends, “The mystical character of commodities does not originate [. . .] in their use-value” (71).

Instead, the mystery of commodities, or the very quality that transforms mere useful objects *into* commodities, has its origins in the second form of value pertaining to them, their *exchange-value*. Exchange-value denotes the commodity’s equivalent value in trade for other objects or, in advanced capitalist societies, money. Unlike use-value, exchange-value is strictly comparable from object to object. Value is associated with objects in a capitalist society on the basis of their relative monetary price, which bears no meaning at all outside a regulatory system of market exchange. In further contrast to use-value, exchange-value is in no way a natural property of the object itself. Instead, it is a form of value determined by the amount of human labour required to produce objects, and analyzable under Marx’s “labour theory of value.” Time, as the common measure of human labour expenditure, serves as a universal measure whereby various kinds of labour can be compared: “The equalisation of the most different kinds of labour can be the result only of an abstraction from their inequalities, or of reducing them to their common denominator, viz., expenditure of human labour-power or human labour in the abstract” (73). In the most advanced capitalist societies, labour time achieves a “phenomenal form” (42) through a general equivalent, such as gold, which serves as the standard to which all other commodities are compared.

Despite the fact that these two types of value can be discerned in objects from the first moment that commodities are exchanged for other commodities, it is only in more advanced capitalist societies, such as those in which the money form is fully developed,

that the distinction between use- and exchange-value takes on its greatest and most disturbing significance. As Marx makes clear, “This division of a product into a useful thing and a value becomes practically important, only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged, and their character as values has therefore to be taken into account, beforehand, during production” (73). At this stage, individual labour takes on a two-fold character. It must, at one and the same time, constitute itself as socially useful labour, capable of responding to a specific social need, while also satisfying the needs of the human producer. In a world in which the abstraction of human labour in terms of value is an “established social fact” (73), the latter aspect can only be accomplished through exchange of the products of individual labour with other products. But this necessary act of exchange, far from revealing the social character of the labour that makes it possible, instead conceals the causal relationship between labour-time and exchange-value:

Hence, when we bring the products of our labour into relation with each other as values, it is not because we see in these articles the material receptacles of homogeneous human labour. Quite the contrary: whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it. Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic.
(74)

It is this transformation of the produced object into a hieroglyphic that grants the commodity its strange and mysterious quality, for rather than revealing the determinants of its value in abstract, socially useful human labour, the commodity appears to take on that social character itself in its relations with other objects. As a result, a disturbing

inversion takes place, whereby inanimate objects appear, through exchange, to exhibit a real *social* life of their own, while their human producers inhabit purely material relations with one another. This phenomenon Marx calls the fetishism of commodities:

There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (72)

Despite appearances to the contrary, therefore, a commodity is never a simple thing to understand. This is because, as a social product intended for sale, every commodity is an object “whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses” (72). Because of this admixture of visible and invisible qualities, the commodity retains its magic, its mystery, even once its “secret” is revealed, since the fetish appears so normal a part of everyday life that even the discovery of a secret behind it cannot thwart its power. Thus Marx's theory identifies the commodity's mystification at two different levels, corresponding to what Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, calls its *content* and its *form* (15). First, in keeping with the primitive fetishism to which Marx likens that of the commodity, capitalists forget that it is they themselves who endow the fetish with its apparent life through the act of exchange. This is the unseen content of the commodity, the secret which Marx's labour theory of value reveals. But beyond this, there is a second level of mystification, by which the fetish makes itself appear as completely familiar, as if exchange-value were a natural part of the

commodity itself. This is what Žižek calls the commodity-fetish's "true secret, not the secret *behind* the form but *the secret of this form itself*" (15). It is this level of mystification that is most difficult to dispel precisely because it appears to need no analysis in the first place. To dispel the fetish's magic at this level, all that will suffice is an historical analysis of the means by which the content has become disguised in its form, as Žižek observes: "We must, then, accomplish another crucial step and analyse the genesis of the commodity-form itself. It is not sufficient to reduce the form to the essence, to the hidden kernel, we must also examine the process--homologous to the 'dream-work'--by means of which the concealed content assumes such a form [. . .]" (15).¹¹

For Marx, then, the nature of fetishism's threat is somewhat different than in the first-encounter theories examined by Pietz. For the early Dutch traders, the fetishist's faith in magic and plurality challenged the emergent Enlightenment models of history and rationality, and thus had to be cast as dangerously outside those models. In Marx, on the contrary, fetishism is threatening precisely because it has become rationalized *within* social constructions of reality, and no longer seems magical at all. As an "icon of rational space-time" (Mitchell 196), it has become an essential part of what Žižek calls the social illusion through which we perceive reality. This illusion is particularly intractable because,

the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are

doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. (*Sublime* 32-33)

In defining commodity fetishism, then, Marx's goal is both to reimburse the fetish with magic, so as to show its incompatibility with the rational world view in which it has taken refuge, and to explain how this incompatibility has been historically perpetuated through the illusion of the commodity form.

The way in which Marx accomplishes this task has not gone unrecognized as bearing important consequences for the employment of history. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White too reads Marx's theory in terms of a distinction between form and content; but where Žižek's emphasis is on ideology, White argues that the theory of commodity fetishism serves as a distillation of Marx's entire "dialectical-materialistic" conception of history. White sees the labour theory of value as inaugurating a difference between use- and exchange-value so as to secure a distinction between the content and the form of the commodity in any system of economic exchange (287). The form of value, in White's reading, resides in the degrees of evolution of the commodity itself, ranging from its primitive form, to its most sophisticated and fetishistic form, that of money. The content, on the other hand, corresponds to the metaphorical expression of a commodity's value in relation to another commodity, effected through the abstraction of various forms of human labour into a common denominator of labour time (291). This content remains the same throughout the various forms in which it manifests itself, and therefore constitutes the hidden truth of value in its various guises. To this extent, then, White's portrayal of form and content within Marx's theory accords with that of Žižek. But White goes on to

argue that the division of content and form at the level of value corresponds directly to

Marx's philosophy of history:

I have stressed Marx's distinction between the "form" and the "content" of the value contained in any given commodity because it is precisely analogous to the distinction he wanted to establish in his philosophy of history between the "phenomena" of the historical process and their inner, or hidden, "meaning." The phenomenal form of history is the succession of different kinds of society testified to by the historical record in its unanalyzed form. The forms of society change in the same way that the forms of value do, but their meaning, the significance of these changes, remains as constant as does the "jelly" of labor which endows all commodities with their *true*, or essential, value. This means that the *forms of society produced by the historical process* are to the *forms of value* as the *modes of production* which determine those forms of society are to the *value of commodities*. The *forms* of historical existence are given in the Superstructure; the *content* of historical existence is given in the Base (the modes of production). (294)

For White, Marx's dialectical method of analyzing history, which grants it a "manifest and a hidden level of meaning" (315), casts the hidden level, the Base, as the "agency of *significant* historical change" (316).

While I will not delve into White's tropological analysis of Marx's emplotment of history, I quote at length his identification of commodity fetishism as the "jelly" of Marx's historical theory because it offers a valuable tool for diagnosing the specific means by which Marx's historiographic treatment of the fetish privileges what I am calling a distanced or epistemological perspective. The correspondence between value and historical meaning in terms of a shared structure of form and content suggests that the imputation of meaning to the fetish depends upon a particular kind of narrative construction. Specifically, what Žižek calls the appeal to history as a means of revealing the secret of the fetish's form is, in White's view, a narrative strategy for *producing* that

meaning. The assumption of a distinction between form and content at the level of history buttresses the assumption of a distinction between form and content in the fetish. In other words, in Marx's theory, history does not *explain* the fetish's meaning (content) or its form; rather, history preserves the idea that the fetish *has* meaning by serving as a "true" narrative ground for the distinction between form and content.

What this suggests is that the decision to *read* fetishism as a problem of form vs. content performatively *creates* the distanced historical perspective on the fetish. Recall that the problem of the commodity, for Marx, is that it appears to require no analysis at all. Nothing is puzzling about it; its value in trade for other commodities seems a part of its objective, natural constitution. To the victim of the fetish's magic, even the fact that the commodity appears to enjoy a social life of its own occasions no sense of the strange or inappropriate. In White's terminology, we might say that this perspective is defined by its inability to distinguish between the fetish's form and its content. Such refusal prevents any sense of historical progression, as Marx points out in his analysis of gold:

What appears to happen is, not that gold becomes money, in consequence of all other commodities expressing their values in it, but, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in gold, because it is money. The intermediate steps of the process vanish in the result and leave no trace behind. (*Capital* 92)

If the commodity, from this perspective, fails to evince any trace of its past, it is because the value-content of gold, or its underlying meaning, is confused with its very form.¹²

Rather than seeing gold's monetary form as the process of a social or historical investment of value, the commodity fetishist sees gold's form *as* value. From this perspective, gold is money just as obviously as it is a metal with specific physical

properties. The relationship between the two levels of fetishism's double illusion, then, is that failure to understand the history of the commodity, and its origins in the social imputation of value, confuses *ontological* categories. The fetishist confuses subjective/purposive qualities (the social value of gold, determined by human intention) with objective qualities (the existence of gold as a natural metal). Gold appears really to be money; but such reality is built out of a heterogeneous mixture of incompatible ontological categories, of "visible and invisible" qualities which tacitly point to a reality that is fractured and divided in its ontological make-up.

Marx's metaphysical realist take on this problem (to use Blais's terminology) is revealed in the fact that he defines as *illusory* the perception of multiple worlds, and multiple historical truths, that results from the fetishist's confusion of ontological categories. That fetishism, in Marx's view, is a practice that occasions the perception of multiple worlds is a fact explained both by its status as an expression of capitalism's internal contradictions, and by its ties to the "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world." In his fourth thesis on Feuerbach, Marx discusses the relationship between self-contradiction in the secular realm and the fracturing and duplication of worlds:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis raises itself above itself and establishes for itself an independent realm in the clouds can be explained only through the cleavage and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The latter must therefore in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. (198)

In what is sometimes considered the standard reading of Marx's theory of history, G. A. Cohen treats this passage as the conceptual basis for Marx's theory of commodity

fetishism, and he summarizes it as follows: “Schism in the primary world generates a second world, illusory in itself, and masking the first one” (126). According to Cohen, Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism is an effort to diagnose and circumvent a crucial “error of omission” made by Feuerbach in his reading of religion, and later duplicated by classical economists in their interpretation of exchange-value: the failure to recognize that the appearance of religion, or exchange-value, is dependent on division in the secular world. For Marx, according to Cohen, the theory of commodity fetishism is not primarily intended to correct the opinion of the “vulgar economists,” who actually *believe* in the truth of the illusory world as it is, and perpetuate it through their own misguided analyses. Instead, it is aimed at those who, like Feuerbach, recognize the falsity of that world yet remain powerless to change it because they are unable to locate its origins in social fragmentation (126). Marx is thus primarily concerned with showing how the problem of multiple worlds is itself a product of a particular historical configuration which gives rise to the social divisions and contradictions in question.

At its root, then, one might say that the theory of commodity fetishism is an effort to bridge the gap between the social and natural worlds (which appear, to the classical economist, as “naturally” and immutably distinct), through a narrative of history that explains their apparent divergence. At the same time, however, Marx’s theory must also correct the error of the commodity fetishist him or herself, which is the error of confusing ontological categories when accepting the commodity’s socially-determined value as natural. As a result, the commodity fetish, constitutionally divided into a use-value and an exchange-value, stands (as in the earliest first-encounter theories of fetishism) as an

index of the problem of multiple worlds. Unless the relationship between use-value and exchange-value is in some sense historicized, it runs the risk of further naturalizing the sense of ontological division foregrounded by its internal make-up. On the other hand, unless the dividedness of the commodity is brought to light, we are left in the realm of the vulgar economist and fetishist, who take the illusory world for the real.

Yet even conceding that the theory of commodity fetishism is in some sense a response to the problem of multiple worlds or realities, the question yet remains as to how, specifically, Marx used history to offset the fetish's ontological threat. White's thesis that the theory of commodity fetishism serves as the "jelly" of Marx's historical theory suggests that the decision to read the fetish as a problem of meaning performatively creates the distanced perspective on fetishism through the institution of a form and content distinction buttressed through the treatment of the fetish in a historical narrative. Yet this does not tell us enough about why, in his analysis of the commodity itself, Marx chooses the *particular* narrative form which he does in order to historicize the relationship between use-value and exchange-value. That narrative form is a complex story of origins which, by staging "first" and "second" sightings of the commodity itself, seeks to portray the fetish as both standing for, and concealing, its own historical evolution. The task is therefore to understand how, via this narrative strategy, Marx succeeds in placing emphasis on the fetish's power of concealment, while drawing attention away from the fetish's ability to stand for history. A closer examination of the historical contradiction in which Marx's commodity is engaged will shed light on the way in which history becomes a narrative tool for containing the problem of multiple worlds

embodied in the fetish.

In conducting this analysis, it is necessary to approach Marx's theory from a direction different from that of poststructuralist thinkers who have contented themselves with the conclusion that Marx, in attempting to historicize the relationship between use-value and exchange-value, ends up merely naturalizing use-value. Foremost among these is Jean Baudrillard, who has famously accused Marx of introducing use-value as a myth of primary needs which, far from providing a historical precedent for exchange-value, *rationalizes* its ideological operation *after the fact* (*Critique* 29). In Baudrillard's reading, use-value, as Marxism's practical and ideological guarantee of the real, is implicated in a fetishism more profound and mysterious than that of exchange-value, since it is "total mystery grounded anthropologically in an unsurpassable original reference" (*Critique* 139). But Baudrillard's deconstruction of Marx's theory, persuasive as it is, proceeds too quickly in its effort to criticize Marx for misperceiving the order of operations whereby use-value serves as the alibi for exchange-value. Attacking Marx on ideological grounds, Baudrillard does not examine the specific historical and narrative strategies by which Marx attempts to contain the ontological threat posed by the fetish.

Instead, to examine Marx's narrative strategies requires that we approach his theory by interpreting its presentation of a "second sight" of the commodity in the context of what Cohen describes as Marx's essentially Victorian distinction between untheorized perception and analytical science. I contend that the rhetorical effect of presenting "first" and "second" sightings of the commodity performs a narrative historicization of the commodity's division between use- and exchange-value that establishes the link between

social and natural worlds which Marx desires, while yet sheltering the fetish's constructive ties to history from epistemological examination. The result is that Marx constructs the commodity fetish as a unique kind of historical trace--one which binds together not only the universal and lived time described by Ricoeur, but which also produces an alternative temporality defined as "illusory" through the naturalizing processes identified by Baudrillard.

Marx's historicizing of the relationship between use-value and exchange-value begins to unfold in the first two sentences of his theory: "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (71). The first appearance of the commodity as a "very trivial thing" is, as we have seen, indicative of the deepest level of its magic, the "double forgetting" by which the fetish causes even its own magical nature to be forgotten. Yet at the same time, this naturalness remains, as Marx goes on to tell us, a part of the object so long as we do not consider its commodified aspect: "So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point of view that those properties are the product of human labour" (71). Discussion of the object's use, appearing *after* the second sight of the fetish (the analytical sighting that reveals its constitution) is linked via the language of naturalism to the first sighting of the commodity as an "easily understood" and "trivial" thing. The effect is to suggest that use-value *precedes* the revelation of the fetish's "metaphysical subtleties" in a linear movement, even though the only object we are

presented with, in this narrative framework, is the commodity-fetish. To further emphasize the sense of a chronological relationship between what will soon be identified as use-value and exchange-value, Marx describes the object's value in use in almost pastoral terms, and presents it as occurring *before* the emergence of the commodity form:

It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was. (71)

Owing to the verbal power of the two very different descriptions of the object which Marx provides here, the table undergoes a strange and unsettling split. It is almost as if, for a moment, we are looking at two different objects--one a standard table, compliant with the human needs for which it was constructed, and the other a sinister entity, free to thwart human intention with its own "grotesque ideas." Furthermore, these objects are separated by what seems an ontological divide: the "transcendent" table does not appear to exist in the same order of reality as the non-magical table. This descriptive splitting is not unintentional, in my reading, but rather part of the narrative strategy by which Marx both acknowledges the problem of multiple worlds embodied in the fetish, and yet downplays the ontological ramifications of that problem through historicization.

It is not difficult to find proof here to support Baudrillard's claim that use-value is installed retroactively as a justification for exchange-value. Mention of use-value does not appear until after the second, "mystical" sighting of the commodity. But then again,

if we look closely, neither does exchange-value. To seize on use-value alone as Marx's theoretical guarantee of the real is already to overlook what Marx presents, at the start of his narrative, as the *untheorized* or *pretheoretical* placeholder of the real, which is the "first glance" at the commodity, prior to analysis. This first glance is important because, given Marx's thinking about the distinction between appearance and reality, and the impact of that distinction on the problem of multiple worlds, it grounds the concept of reality itself (via use-value) as *epistemologically unobservable*.

According to Cohen, Marx believed, in keeping with the philosophers of his age, in a "two-dimensional contrast between observation and theory" (329). In opposition to those who would assume a continuity between Marxian thought and contemporary philosophy of science, Cohen argues that Marx's repeated use of scientific examples to explain what he took to be the analytical purpose of sociological theory erects a fundamentally Victorian distinction between appearance and reality. This distinction is summarized by Cohen as follows: "there is a gulf between appearance and reality when and only when the explanation of a state of affairs falsifies the description it is natural to give of it if one lacks the explanation" (329). Cohen is adamant about the fact that the distinction between appearance and reality in Marx is not reducible to the substitution of merely one *theory* by another. Instead, Marx's distinction presents reality as not merely sociologically but *epistemologically* unobservable. It is for this reason that, according to Cohen, Marx used examples taken from natural science to buttress his claims about the function of social analysis. Until the contradictions and rifts in the secular world are resolved, and science is no longer needed, the function of science will be to demystify or

subvert our natural or pretheoretical observations about the apparent reality with which we are faced.¹³

But why is this important? Cohen's reading is valuable because it suggests that Marx's efforts to succeed where Feuerbach had failed--to resolve the problem of multiple worlds spawned by secular rifts--demanded faith in the possibility of observation untainted by any theoretical framework. Returning to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, we see how this concept of untainted perception plays an important role in historicizing the relationship between use-value and exchange-value. The "first sight" of the commodity through which Marx introduces his theory should be taken as an example of untainted perception, whose function is to introduce the commodity ambiguously in two simultaneous historical times. On the one hand, because we are looking at a commodity, we are in the present, at a point in which the fetish has exercised its deepest magic of double forgetting. But, at the same time, since this object appears to require no analysis, we seem also to stand at a point in the historical past, prior to the emergence of the commodity's mystifying power. The function of the "second sight," then, is to proclaim in favour of the former interpretation, revealing the constitutive reality of the commodity and revising the ambiguity of the previous sighting such that only the former impression--that of our having perceived the fetish's magic--is admitted into the narrative. But this retrospective revision of the first sighting does not dispel entirely our supposedly "untheorized" or "pretheoretical" engagement with the commodity. Marx's introduction of the concepts of use-value and exchange-value recalls that sense of untheorized observation at several points, relying on it as the basis for an intuitive,

naturalized understanding of use-value.

This is especially the case when Marx invites us to think of the table solely as “a value in use.” The imaginative leap required is *historical* in the sense that it seems to grant us the ability to jump back in time to a moment prior to the emergence of the commodity, prior to our reading of Marx’s demystifying theory itself. Of course, this type of a leap has already been figured in the “pretheoretical” engagement with the commodity which opens Marx’s theory; but if we do actually go back to that first encounter in Marx’s narrative, we find we are already face to face with the commodity. This is the magic that Marx’s theory works in narrative terms. By constatively dispelling the illusion of the commodity, and dividing it into a use-value and an exchange-value, Marx’s theory also performatively *dramatizes* the fetish’s mystifying ability to conceal history by dangling before us the promise of a return to that pretheoretical vision of the object that it has already disavowed. Although we are told that it is the commodity form in which mystification lies, our reading experience is haunted by the simultaneous memory/hope of an untheorized vision of the object that circumscribes the history Marx unfolds.

By virtue of its strategic construction, then, Marx’s theory narratively performs what it describes as the commodity’s ability to conceal its history. This performance is analogous to the way in which, as Thomas Keenan argues, Marx’s theory rhetorically rehearses the process of abstraction which grounds exchange itself:

As the figure for the commodity--for the useful thing become exchangeable, for the doubled structure--the table can be substituted or exchanged for any other commodity in Marx’s demonstration, “in the same way” that commodities can be exchanged for other commodities. [. .

.] The commodity as such (e.g. the table) is already structured like a figure, since use values cannot be directly exchanged, having nothing in common around or across which the substitution could be organized, but must instead be mediated or figured by being transformed into so-called exchange values. (183)

In Keenan's reading, the textual necessity by which the table must be presented as only one *example* of a commodity reinforces the distinction between form and content which Marx seeks to advance. Likewise, even prior to the theoretical elaboration of use-value and exchange-value, the labelling of first and second sightings of the commodity emphasizes a distinction between form and content on a linear, teleological basis.

Furthermore, if we recall Ricoeur's definition of history as that narrative which binds lived time within universal time, then it is possible to read the commodity in its pretheoretical stage as the philosophical connector which, for Marx, allows the narrative of history to bridge the social and natural worlds. Unlike the generic connector of Ricoeur's account, however, the ontology of Marx's commodity is such that, by its very constitution as an index of the division between worlds, it militates against any singular narrative reconstruction of its own history. Thus use-value alone must be retroactively associated with that first, pre-theoretical sighting, so as to portray the fetish's allegiance to alternative conceptions of time or history (grounded in its exchange-value) as *falsification*. Retroactively confining the fetish's ability to "stand for" history to its functional use-value does not merely "pass over" the ontological problem of the historical trace, as per the epistemological interest of historiography, according to Ricoeur. Instead, Marx's theory "resolves" the fetish's contradictory ties to multiple worlds, and multiple histories, by shielding the pre-theorized encounter with the commodity (a narrative gap in

which, we might say, the fetish's "magical materiality" is situated) from analysis through the phantasmatic property of use-value.¹⁴

With this bit of knowledge in hand, we can go one further than White and say that, not only does Marx's theory of commodity fetishism serve as a distillation of his theory of history, insofar as the methods of narrative emplotment go, but that Marx's treatment of the fetish as a historical trace makes it an important basis for his construction of historical *time*. Yet it does so in such a way as to protect time itself, as "materialism's transcendent principle" (Pietz, "Fetishism" 150), from analysis. In this regard, Marx's theory of fetishism is similar to that of Freud, in which the fetish serves to safeguard the place of the phallus as the privileged object of psychoanalysis. To further develop this comparison, I turn now to Freud.

Freud's First Encounter

Freud's theory of fetishism is probably the one that underlies what most people think of when they encounter the word *fetish*. Though Freud was by no means the first theorist to associate sexual object-fixation with religious fetishism,¹⁵ his definition has become, in both popular and critical literature on the subject, the pre-eminent account of sexual fetishism. Even if Freud's central insight, that the fetish serves as a penis-substitute, is not well-known, casual usage of the term *fetish* in contemporary culture almost always connotes an implicitly Freudian notion of unconscious associations stemming from (usually forgotten) experiences in earliest childhood.

Undoubtedly, much of the lasting impact of Freud's theory is attributable to its

seductive narrative packaging. Freud's discussion of fetishism follows a structural pattern closer than that of Marx to the model first-encounter narrative which I examined at the beginning of this chapter. But unlike Marx, who is concerned with the status of the commodity in the eyes of an entire social class or system, Freud examines fetish-formation as a conjuncture of desire with a unique object or part-object for a particular individual. For Freud, the historical problem associated with fetishism is not one of concealed origins on a social scale, but rather of developmental anomalies at a psychosexual level. Nevertheless, because fetishism is a prevalent sexual perversion, and sheds light on normal human sexual development, its analysis has important consequences for the employment of teleological and historical narratives.

Although Freud contributed a number of important ideas to a study of the sexual fetish¹⁶, his main contribution is his 1927 essay entitled, "Fetishism." Here Freud presents the fetish as a phallic substitute, constructed by the male and offered as a supplement to the female body in order to render it tolerable as an object of desire. The need for this supplement is rooted in the fear of castration experienced by all males on first glimpse of the female genitals. According to Freud, this first encounter with biological female reality is the central event in a lost stage of psychic development, which only psychoanalysis is able to reconstruct. Freud's essay presents this fixating encounter as a narrative documenting the construction of a compromise between unconscious belief and external reality.

In keeping with Freud's theories about sexual exploration in children, this narrative centers on a young boy driven toward scopic examination of the female body.¹⁷

Taking the first woman to appear unclothed before him (his mother) as his site of exploration, the boy directs his interest toward the longed-for revelation of the female genitals. What he sees there, however, deeply traumatizes him. Expecting his mother to possess an anatomy like his own, his first sight of her nakedness stands as a shocking corrective to his unconscious belief that women are phallicly endowed. Forced to interpret his mother's "missing" penis in the only means available to him--that it has been cut off--the boy then confronts a second, more disturbing realization: that he, too, is capable of losing his penis. At this point, the boy attempts to deny the original perception altogether:

What happened, therefore, was that the boy refused to take cognizance of the fact of his having perceived that a woman does not possess a penis. No, that could not be true: for if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger; and against that there rose in rebellion the portion of his narcissism which Nature has, as a precaution, attached to that particular organ. (153)

But the boy is unable simply to deny what he has seen. Instead, his attempt at denial results in a replacement of the missing object, the maternal phallus, by a substitute. That substitute object is chosen not for its resemblance to the missing penis, but on the basis of its having been available in the boy's field of vision just prior to the sight of castration.

The resultant fetish partially blocks the moment of genital revelation from memory:

It seems rather that when the fetish is instituted some process occurs which reminds one of the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia. As in this latter case, the subject's interest comes to a halt half-way, as it were; it is as though the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish. (155)

For Freud, this reversion explains the prevalence of feet, underclothing, and hair as fetishes, since those objects are the most likely to be encountered in a position visually

contiguous to the female genitals.

The fetish, in this theory, is thus born out of the effort to transfer narcissistic interest in the mother's lost penis to a new object. But it is important to note that the substitute does not mask entirely the troubling reality of the mother's loss. Instead, according to Freud, it forms a concrete embodiment of the "energetic action" taken to *disavow* her castration:

It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached [. . .]. Yes, in his mind the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute. (154)

Disavowal, the psychic mechanism whereby the ego splits in order to maintain its simultaneous fidelity to two contradictory assertions, enables the boy to continue believing that the woman has the phallus, while also acknowledging its absence. By this unconscious process, the fetish becomes "a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it" (154). It is this divided attitude toward woman's castration that explains the fetishist's lingering aversion to the female genitals, and which also introduces, in some cases, a measure of hostility in the fetishist's treatment of the substitute object (157).

Two important benefits accrue to the fetishist as a result of this perversion, according to Freud. First, the endowment of woman with the penis "saves the fetishist

from becoming a homosexual” (154). Second, because the fetish is not recognized as such by others, it is often available to the fetishist without the trouble or labour required for procuring normal sexual relations (154). Freud introduces his essay by commenting on how the fetish eases the erotic life of the fetishist, to the point that it is rarely a cause of suffering even when recognized by the fetishist as an “abnormality” (152). Thus even granting the patronizing tone in which Freud presents these advantages, his theory is more sympathetic to the fetishist than that of Marx. In addition, Freud acknowledges fetishism as a privileged object of study because it provides clear evidence of castration anxiety: “An investigation of fetishism is strongly recommended to anyone who still doubts the existence of the castration complex or who can still believe that fright at the sight of the female genital has some other ground [. . .]” (155).¹⁸

Not surprisingly, it is this endorsement of fetishism as proof of one the central tenets of psychoanalysis that has made it a favourite target among Freud’s critics. Foremost among these, perhaps, are theorists of female fetishism, who have interpreted the link between the fetish and castration as itself a monument to the fixation of psychoanalysis on the penis and phallus. I shall examine several of these arguments in Chapter Four; but suffice it to say, for now, that the project to define female fetishism reads Freud’s sympathy for the (male) fetishist as a symptom of Freud’s misogynistic acceptance of the “truth” of female lack: “Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of the female genital” (“Fetishism” 154).

Yet in focusing on Freud’s definition of the fetish as a replacement for the absent penis, revisionist theories of fetishism often mirror what I shall argue is Freud’s

privileging of an epistemological orientation toward the fetish object as a “freezing” of temporal or teleological movement. It must be remembered that the fetish is, by Freud’s own definition, the remnant of a particular historical *moment* in the life of the fetishist: “pieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as a fetish, crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic” (155). The debate over what the fetish stands for too often forgets the very interesting narrative and temporal reversals that occur in Freud’s theory, by which the fetish is erected not only as a penis-substitute, but also as a unique trace of the past.

One theorist who has not ignored the complex relationship between fetishism and temporality in Freud is Whitney Davis. Davis’s extremely detailed treatment of Freud’s 1927 essay is a two-fold argument, part of which is devoted to making sense of the often ignored advantage which Freud proclaimed for the fetishist: its ability to “save” him from homosexuality. While I shall address this portion of Davis’s argument where necessary, I am far more interested in the second component of Davis’s essay, which is its extrapolation of the “intrapsychic history” unique to fetish-formation.

That history can be reconstructed through a close examination of fetishism’s unique *temporal* movement, which Davis divides into four general phases: 1) prefetishistic or phobic looking, 2) fetichistic or obsessive looking, 3) classical fetishism or fixation, and 4) fetichistic practice. The first phase, prefetishistic looking, comprises the initial visual explorations conducted by the little boy over his mother’s body. This phase includes what Freud describes as the traumatic sight of the female genitals, but stops short of the interpretation of that sight as evidence of castration. Prefetishistic

looking therefore involves the denial of the sight of the mother's genitals as well as the repression of the unpleasant feelings associated with that denial, leading to a compromise that causes the prefetishist to "lose interest" in the female genitals altogether (96-97). It is at this stage, according to Davis, that the prefetishist is given over to the homosexuality from which, according to Freud, only a continued fascination in the problem of denial itself could save him.

The second phase in the temporality of Freudian fetishism, "fetishistic looking," thus begins with the fascination that the fetishist feels for the compromise--a heightening of interest proceeding from the denial of *ever having denied* the mother's lack of a penis. This heightening is effected through the belief that the mother once had a penis but lost it before he began to search for it (97)--a belief that necessitates the fetishist's imagining of an unseen event. This event, of course, is the father's castration of the mother; but the imagining of this historical moment, according to Davis, is not enough to explain the turn toward fetishistic looking. On the basis of fetishism's reputed ability to save the fetishist from homosexuality, Davis maintains that "fetishism cannot be conceptualized without referring to the father's difference in relation to the child" (99). Indeed, the heightening of the fetishist's interest in the mother's castration necessitates what Davis calls a "fully imaginary history of other past and future looking" (99) involving the father, the mother, and the boy himself. Looking at his mother, the boy imagines that his father has previously looked there (in order to castrate her), and looking at himself, the boy also suspects and fears that his father may "look" there. This latter fear (that of castration anxiety) causes the fetishist, like the prefetishist, to look away from his mother's

castration, but--and here is the key difference--*only* after having first looked down at himself: "For a fetishist, looking up at mother ends, by way of imagining a whole history of other lookings, in looking down at himself. Fetishistic looking can be distinguished, then, from the prefetishist's *not-looking at the same thing* as a *looking at other things*" (100).

It is important to note, however, that we still have not arrived, in Davis's view, at fetishism *per se*. For fetishistic looking, the second phase in the forward temporality of fetishism, differs from the third phase, *classical fetishism*, in that it is not fixated. Rather than the perpetual "looking at the same other thing" (101, text normalized) which characterizes the fetishist, fetishistic looking names the oscillation of castration anxiety in which all males are involved. Davis describes the institution of the "permanent memorial" or substitute as the last stage in the forward temporality of the fetishist's interest, a kind of "accommodation between prefetishistic and fetishistic looking" (101). This reinforcement, following Freud's account, involves a return to the last impression prior to the unwished-for sight of castration, and the fixating of that impression as the fetishist's psychic "fetish-image" (101).

Particularly interesting, at this point, is the distinction Davis makes between this psychic "return," which defines classical fetishism, and the fourth phase of the fetishist's forward temporality, *fetishistic practice*. The distinction rests on a strict division which Davis institutes between what he calls the interior *fetish-image* and the external *fetish-effigies*, or the real objects with which the fetishist interacts in *fetishistic practice*. These objects, though allowing the fetishist to engage in symbolic games that do provide some

limited satisfaction, always fall short of the interior fetish-image, the “collation” of the various stages of the intrapsychic history of fetish-formation (110). This is because, according to Davis, the fetish-effigy is only a *sign* of that image, and never capable of a full representation since that image itself is only a *substitute* for forgotten memories and intrapsychic material: “He cannot decide whether a fetish-effigy satisfies him or does not satisfy him because he cannot remember the whole of what the fetish-image, which the effigy is supposed to represent as its sign, itself represents as substitute” (110). This rigid distinction between the external effigy as *sign*, and the internal image as *substitute*, leads Davis to place the fetish-effigy outside the realm of intrapsychic history which the forward temporality of fetishistic interest describes:

In fetishistic practice, then, the fetishist peers at his own fetish-image but is held up at the fetish-effigy. Whereas the fetish-image is the last impression which has become the first impression, the fetish-effigy is *nothing but* a first impression. In Freudian fetishism, one has seen it all before, yet finds it momentarily exciting because the fetish-effigy always works as the absolute first impression, with no past and no future. (111)

One need not agree with Davis’s ultimately conservative view of what constitutes a true fetishism in the cultural sphere in order to appreciate his subtle reading of temporality in Freud’s account.¹⁹ For the purposes of this study, the value of Davis’s reading is that it irons out the peculiar temporal movement of fetish-formation into a linear process, thereby surpassing even Freud in the effort to affirm a distinction between the fetishist’s inner historical experience, and an external temporal flow. Through its introduction of new terms and stages intended to clarify and elaborate on Freud’s argument, Davis’s analysis sheds light on Freudian theory even as it symptomatically showcases the ontological and epistemological assumptions necessary to privileging a

distanced historical approach to fetishism.

Perhaps the single most important observation in Davis's argument is that the distinction between the two narrative movements in Freud's theory of fetishism (normal or "forward," and perverse or "backward") is established through an essential *loss of interest* for the fetishist. Though Freud nowhere explicitly mentions this lost interest, his theory nevertheless performatively *enacts* it through his suggestion that fetishism saves the fetishist from homosexuality. As Davis points out, the male's "advantageous" escape from homosexuality makes sense as a consequence of Freud's theory only if an opposition is established between *prefetishistic* and *fetishistic* looking on the basis of the little boy's reaction to the sight of the female genitals (106). Accordingly, it is the distinction between the prefetishist's final *disinterest* in what he has seen there, compared to the fetishist's *obsessive interest* in it, that defines Davis's two initial stages in the evolution of fetish-formation. This formulation emphasizes the extent to which the difference between real and imaginary in Freud's text is produced by, and dependent on, a *teleological* movement which places the real *prior* to the imaginary.²⁰

In addition, Davis's reading also shows how this linear teleology is protected, in the third and fourth stages of fetish-formation, from contamination by the "reversal" of fetishistic interest. Here, however, the primary value of Davis's text, for my purposes, is symptomatic. Davis's splitting of the Freudian fetish into fetish-image and fetish-effigy (the fixated objects of classical fetishism and fetishistic practice, respectively) maintains the coherence of fetishism's forward temporality, but at the expense of foregrounding the conditions of its collapse. By dividing the fetish into two ontologically distinct halves,

Davis ensures that the teleological distinction established between real and imaginary on the basis of disinterested versus interested looking is not disrupted by the fetishist's scopic return to a previously *uninteresting* object. Recall that, in Freud's theory, the object that will become the fetish appears *before* the sight of the female genitals. In order to speak of a forward temporality in fetish formation, this first appearance must not generate so much interest in the boy that he is diverted from his intended goal, which is the perception of the female genitalia. Only later, when the little boy returns to the sight of the object as a refuge from the horror of castration, should the object take on that intense interest, becoming the fetish. What Davis's theory aims to provide is an ontological assurance that the first sighting cannot effect any diversion of interest. The strategy is to confine interest to the imaginary, and then to ensure, through the distinction between fetish-image and fetish-effigy, that the fetish has no imaginary component until *after* the sighting of castration.

The essential relationship between interest and the imaginary in Davis's argument is evident in the distinction Davis makes between prefetishistic and fetishistic looking, which depends on the little boy's reaction to the *real* female genitals. Initially, the boy is interested in the woman only because he imagines that she has the phallus. Once the boy's imaginary object is found to be missing, he is faced, in Davis's model, with three choices: he can either give up the real of the female genitals altogether (the homosexual option), or remain in a state of oscillating, non-fixated "looking away" from the real (the heterosexual option), or he can transfer his imaginary interest to a substitute object (the fetishistic option). The shock or trauma of castration anxiety precludes any possibility of

remaining interested in the sight of the real, at least within the confines of this narrative. If the boy becomes a fetishist, he transfers his interest to a substitute object that already partakes of real and imaginary qualities. To be sure, this interest is no longer unalloyed as in the stage of prefetishistic looking. Instead, the fetish, as the new object of interest, bears in its constitution evidence of disappointment in the real. It therefore finds its prototype both in the imaginary female phallus, and in the real female genitals as a site of loss or lack. But at the opposite extreme, the boy's horror and disappointment might cause him to lose interest in the female genitals altogether. In this case, his disinterest has its prototype in that "passing over" of the pre-fetish object prior to the revelation of castration. Davis does not mention this relationship between disinterest and the pre-fetish object, but its necessity to his argument is clear enough. The uninteresting object, prior to its fetishization by the fetishist, serves as that place-holder or "gap" in the narrative which grounds the relationship between forward and reverse temporality, as well as between the real and imaginary. It is this institution of *disinterest* in the pre-fetish object which becomes the performative basis for that theoretical "objectivity" enabling Davis to discern a historical movement in fetishism *at a distance* from the fetishist's experience of that history.

But, again, why is the identification of this unacknowledged site important? It is important, first, because most attacks on the psychoanalytic model of fetishism, as I mentioned earlier, have targeted Freud's portrayal of female biology as the unquestioned locus of the real. But what Davis's argument symptomatically reveals, through its emphasis on the role of *disinterest* in Freud's theory, is that the reality of the female

genitals has, itself, a prototype in the pre-fetish object. This suggests that the pre-fetish object might serve as an alternate theoretical site for contesting the relationship which Freud establishes between the fetish and castration on teleological grounds. Second, the identification of the pre-fetish object as a model of the real also draws attention to how the psychoanalytic first-encounter narrative both affirms and denies the value of the fetish as a historical trace. According to Davis, the logic of classical Freudian fetishism constructs the fetish object, or fetish-effigy, as a sign of the interior fetish-image, which is itself “the replacement of a reality” (110). But that replacement, in Davis’s reading, is a material thing only to the extent that it is an intrapsychic *image* substituting for other, forgotten images. In other words, Davis, as theorist, treats the fetish as a historical trace in Ricoeur’s sense of the term, granting it a dual historical status as a sign-function and as a material thing; but Davis’s theory prevents the fetishist from exercising the same privilege, and confines *his* interest in the fetish solely to its function as a *sign*. For Davis, the fetish-effigy, as a material thing, lies *outside* fetishism’s forward temporality. In this, what we might call the realist historiographic impulse of Davis’s theory actually exceeds that of Freud, which makes no hard distinction between fetish-effigy and fetish-image. According to Davis, so far as the fetishist’s interest in the object is directed toward its material/historical reality as a substitute for the female genitals, that reality is always already imaginary, always already a pure image. And so far as the fetish object is a real historical thing, its interest for the fetishist can lie only in its status as a *sign* of that imaginary image. The result is that the fetish’s materiality is a thing of no interest to the fetishist *unless it is already imaginary*.

That Freud's theory of fetishism depends, via Davis's reading, on a form of disinterested looking brings to mind the first, "pre-theoretical" sighting of the commodity in Marx's theory. Likewise, Davis's splitting of the fetish into ontologically distinct entities (the fetish-image and fetish-effigy) recalls Marx's descriptive treatment of the commodity/table. As with Marx's table-splitting, Davis's ontological division *within* the fetish also threatens to erupt *outside* it. If, as Davis maintains, the difference between simple "vision" and "looking" depends on the fetishist becoming *interested* in what he is seeing (95), then there is no definitive way to locate the moment of fetish-formation relative to castration, because there is no way to pinpoint exactly where interest enters the narrative. In Davis's model, castration necessitates that the fetish is ontologically divided before it is constituted; but castration also undoes the very teleology it secures by positing the fetish's constitution *prior to its creation* by the fetishist. Although the fetishist does not look at, but supposedly only "sees" the object that will become the fetish *en route* to the female genitals, his return, after the moment of castration, shows that he has always already "looked" at it as well. The result is that the dividing line of castration which splits the fetish into ontologically distinct entities can also fall between the fetish-effigy *outside* the narrative, and its material original, the pre-fetish object, *inside* the narrative. In such a case, the theorist's *disinterested* or realistic historical narrative is forced to admit of an absolute ontological division not *within* the fetish, from the fetishist's point of view, but rather between the fetish and the non-magical object.

Thus Davis offers a kind of ontological examination of the fetish as a historical trace which emphasizes the assumptions that must be made--and strategically

overwritten--in affirming a distanced approach to the first-encounter narrative. But Davis's reading should not be taken as the last word on teleology in Freud, precisely because it introduces so many terms not found in Freud's original essay. For a reading which sticks more closely to Freud, and which analyzes in depth the possibility of subverting psychoanalytic teleology, I turn now to the work of Leo Bersani. Bersani is one of the few to take seriously the possibility that Freud's implicit *ontology* of perverse sexuality might undo the history of sexual development predicated upon it.

In *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*, Bersani argues that the truth of psychoanalytic theory depends on a series of theoretical break-downs or indeterminacies which Freud's texts themselves reveal and enact. Reading Freud's work as if it were art rather than theory, Bersani attempts to show that psychoanalysis is best understood as a body of texts which mobilize, often unknowingly, the very forces which undermine theoretical distinctions like those between theory and practice, or thinker and history (3-5). Close attention to the previously "suppressed" (31) indeterminacies in Freud's work enables one to see how "psychoanalytic truth can be analyzed--and verified--only as a textual distress" (90, text normalized).

To support his thesis, Bersani makes an example of Freud's *Three Essays On Sexuality*, which, he argues, attempts to transform the ahistorical, non-narratable ontology of human sexuality into a teleological, historical narrative (4). Bersani begins by pointing out that the evolutionary story of human sexual development, progressing from a sadistic-anal pregenital organization to the phallic stage, was not a part of Freud's *Three Essays* when first published in 1905, but instead developed over a series of later editions between

1915 and 1923 (31). This Bersani takes as evidence for the fact that the teleological story of human sexuality was an afterthought to the analysis of sexual perversions, which Freud portrayed from the outset as “*uncompleted narratives*” (32, emphasis Bersani’s). But although Freud tried to develop a contrast between those narratives and a linear or normative evolution, Bersani finds that the Freudian definition of sexual desire which underlies that evolution also subverts it: “The entire teleological point of view is threatened by Freud’s famous remark that ‘the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it’” (35). As a result, Freud’s normative teleology is in fact a circular narrative structurally indistinguishable from the perversions against which it is contrasted (35). This observation leads Bersani to conclude that the search for the phallus as a sexual object is in fact a desire to return to a phase in which no object is privileged--a phase in which “sexuality is ontologically grounded in masochism” (39). If the end of the teleological movement is already present in the beginning, then the effort to construct a history of sexuality is also an effort to deny its masochistic ontology:

The ontology of sexuality is unrelated to its historical development. Sexuality manifests itself in a variety of sexual acts *and* in a variety of presumably nonsexual acts, but its constitutive *excitement* is the same in the loving copulation between two adults, the thrashing of a boundlessly submissive slave by his pitiless master, and the masturbation of the fetishist carried away by an ardently fondled silver slipper. Sexuality is the atemporal substratum of sex, although the teleological argument of the *Three Essays* represents an attempt to rewrite sexuality as history and as story by reinstating structures of organ- and object-specificity. (40)

The theoretical breakdown which Bersani finds here is the ability to raise masochism from its position as an isolatable perversion, like sadism or fetishism, into the whole of sexuality, thereby collapsing the hierarchical organization of sexuality which

psychoanalysis attempts to construct (89).

Although his book treats masochism as the underlying ontology on which Freud's history of human sexuality depends, Bersani's observations offer insight into the emphasis Freud places on the fetish as well. By drawing a distinction between Freud's linear, historical narrative of sexuality, and an "atemporal substratum" of sex on which it depends, but must also deny, Bersani suggests that the effort to historicize sexuality is simultaneously an effort to *normalize* and *rationalize* it (102). And, I suggest, it is in those moments where the drive to gain mastery over the violent ontology of sexuality fails, in theoretical terms, that the epistemological privilege is revealed: "the Freudian text is an exercise in discursive power which subversively points to the impossibility of its claim to power-generating knowledge" (Bersani 102-03). Since fetishism, like masochism, is one of those "uncompleted narratives" against which Freud's historical evolution is constructed, it is not unreasonable to read the teleological doubling back of the fetishist, in Freud's 1927 essay, as additional evidence of the subversion of epistemological inquiry by the ontology of perverse sexuality. In this case, however, the subversive return of the fetishist does not lead to what Bersani calls the masochistic "zero-state" of object-privilege, but to a kind of ontological *revenge* of the fetish on the pre-fetishized or non-magical object.

In my reading of Davis, I have suggested that this ontological revenge would involve, in part, endowing the pre-fetish object with sufficient "interest" to distract the little boy from his intended goal of the female genitals, thereby thwarting the forward temporality of fetish formation. Bersani suggests a similar model of this revenge in an

earlier book co-authored with Ulysse Dutoit, entitled *The Forms of Violence*. There, in a chapter called “Fetishisms and Storytelling,” Bersani and Dutoit read Freud’s essay as “an intriguing narrative jumble” (68) whose central point of interest is not the relationship established between fetish object and its imaginary phallic prototype, but rather the particular narrative movement which fetishistic desire enables. This movement, defined as the fetishist’s narrative unravelling of the event which traumatizes him, places the fetish as temporally *prior to* the traumatic sight of castration, and makes the symbolic equation of fetish to absent penis a subordinate relation:

We find it significant that the view of the fetishistic object should *precede* the traumatic sight. It is as if nothing followed that sight. The child does not search afterwards in his repertory of images for something similar to the penis; he is indifferent to symbolically appropriate objects. Rather, it seems more important for him to return to a moment preceding the shock. The terrifying lack is too powerful to be denied, and therefore the child does not “return” the penis to its proper place. Instead, he simply repeats the experience *without quite having it*. (68)

What is so unique about this reading of Freud is that it points up the ambiguous position of the fetish object *as a fetish* before the sight of castration. Recognition of this possibility opens Freud’s essay to two historical interpretations, depending on how one reads the fetishist’s “first” encounter with the fetish/object.

On the one hand, there is the reading privileged by Freud’s text, where the definition of the fetish as a substitute for the penis make the first encounter with the fetish already a “second sighting” of the object. This reading portrays fetishistic teleology as a perverse return to a moment locatable in linear “forward temporality,” as Davis’s reading has shown. On the other hand, however, there is a historical narrative which begins by treating the fetishist’s first encounter with the object as *already* a fetish, and therefore

already more interesting than the penis. Against the theoretical privilege afforded the reading of the fetish as a symbolic substitute, this alternative reading, as Bersani and Dutoit make clear, becomes available only once the fetishist's own perspective is taken into account: "*The fetishist could therefore think of his aversion to the female genitalia as the result of his attention and desire having been arrested by something more interesting, more desirable, on the way to the woman's genitals*" (68, emphasis added). This shift in narrative focalization de-stabilizes any position from which the fetish could be observed as a non-magical object. If the fetish comes first and controls the unfolding of the historical narrative, then there is no longer any pre-fetish object at all. The missing object in this new narrative is not a phantasmatic entity, such as a maternal phallus, but a *real* object that has been replaced by a magical, fetishized one.

What is so valuable about Bersani and Dutoit's reading, then, is that, while accepting the determinant relationship between castration and fetishism, it manages to suggest an alternative emphasis on the historical and narrative valences of that relationship. It opens an interpretive option between viewing castration as a historical *event*, and seeing it as a historical *movement* or *process*: "the very denial of castration could be taken as a sublimated enactment of it. Desire is "cut off" from its object and travels to other objects" (69). Furthermore, by extolling the second interpretive option, Bersani and Dutoit draw attention to the fact that it is the emphasis on the fetish as a *sign*, over its role as a material *thing* or substitute, that grounds the distanced reading of fetishism's historical movement. If we recall the lesson of Bersani's *The Freudian Body*, we might be tempted to characterize the distanced historical view as an attempt to gain

epistemological mastery over the fetish through the affirmation of a normative teleology of human sexuality. Meanwhile, the fetishist's-eye perspective reveals the fetish's ties to the *ontological* substratum of that teleology, "in which sexuality can arise from any source (we can be stimulated by a breast, a thumb, a swing, a thought...), and in which, finally, any part of the body is a potential erotogenic zone" (Bersani 39).

If the fetishist's perspective poses an ontological challenge to universal historical narratives of sexual development, however, it also undermines that challenge through its allegiance to singular fixation, according to Bersani and Dutoit. For this reason, they shy away from affirming the fetishist's historical point of view, which they portray as itself an "erroneous reading of the original *movement* of his fetishism" (71). That original movement, understood as an "ambiguous negation of the real, a negation which mobilizes the desiring imagination" (71), is compromised by clinical fetishists who bind the imaginary negation of the real to single objects. Yet if Bersani and Dutoit's reversion to demonizing fetishistic practice threatens to nullify the most radical aspects of "Fetishisms and Storytelling," it is also not difficult to see the essentialism that grounds their hesitation. By depicting the fetishist and his real-object fixation as untrue to the imaginary historical movement of his fetishism, Bersani and Dutoit erect, in turn, a rigid distinction between imaginary and real historical narratives which, as I suggested in my reading of Davis, is undone by castration itself. As an anxiety both necessary to, and deeply destructive of, clear distinctions between real and imaginary objects or events, castration can be seen to shift the *ontological boundary* it institutes between a real (male) and imaginary (female) phallus to other objects in the same way in which, as Bersani and

Dutoit argue, it can redirect desire to new locations. For this reason, the belief in an ontological distinction between a fetish object and other, non-magical objects can be taken as a “sublimated enactment” of castration in a manner comparable to the loss of interest in a missing original object of desire. But the fuller elaboration of such an ontological perspective must wait for now.

The Epistemological Emphasis Summarized

My readings of Marx and Freud have left me with the final task of attempting to sum up, briefly, what has been learned from this analysis of what I am calling the epistemological dominant in fetish theory. I began this chapter with a reading of the first encounter theory as described by Pietz, in which I advanced the thesis that, from the very earliest discourses about fetishism onward, the distanced perspective on fetishism as an “unhistorical” practice depends on a denial of the fetish’s ontological difference from other objects, and on a reduction of its historical potential to a problematics of value. I also suggested that, in the process of attempting to affirm the absorbed or ontological perspective on the fetish object, the fetish’s revenge on its history as a discourse may consist, in part, in its ability to reveal a historical *shaping* power of its own. My analysis of the “second sight” in Marx and Freud has, I believe, supported these hypotheses by emphasizing the dependence of both theories on a pretheoretical or disinterested gaze which shields the fetish’s ontological difference--its threatening materiality--from analysis. The first encounter with the fetish in both theories is cast as highly ambiguous sighting of an object which is at one and the same time both natural and magical,

inaugurating alternative temporal movements which are only afterward--in the *second* sight--defined as “historical” and “illusory” or “phantasmatic.”

My suggestion that the privileging or naturalizing of the forward historical movement in each case depends on an *epistemological* perspective on the fetish is supported with reference to Žižek’s analysis of the psychoanalytic “fantasy scene.” In his book *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek describes the fantasy scene as a narrated “time loop” in which, following Lacan, “the ‘object’ of fantasy is not the fantasy-scene itself, its content (the parental coitus, for example), but the impossible gaze witnessing it” (197). According to Žižek, such fantasy-constructs derive their power from the perception of a gap or “missing link” in the chain of diachronous cause and effect which leads to the (synchronous) symbolic order. This irreducible gap defines the status of the subject itself as a constitutive void or Other, such that a difference is established between the natural object as *other* in an *epistemological* sense, and the subject as *Other* in an *ontological* sense: “Nature is simply unknown, its unknowableness is epistemological, whereas the Other *qua* another person is ontologically unknowable; its unknowableness is the way its very being is ontologically constituted, disclosed to us” (199-200). The resulting distinction that arises between symbolic or retroactive causality, and natural or progressive causality, becomes the means by which the symbolic system conceals the necessary void of its own origins through a fantasy rendering the subject as an impossible presence or gaze at its own birth. Such a structure, according to Žižek, is evident not only in psychoanalysis, but in Marx as well, particularly in the way that his historical description of capitalism’s genesis “goes through” the vicious circle of primitive

accumulation as an ideological myth: “In ideology, too, the fantasy-construct is a way for the subject to fill out the “missing link” of its genesis by assuring its presence in the character of pure gaze at its own conception--by enabling it to “jump into the past” and appear as its own cause” (211).²¹

If we take the fetish as an object which confuses distinctions between subject and object,²² then it is possible to attribute to the fetish both objective *otherness* and subjective *Otherness*. In this light, the fetish’s origin-narrative is a fantasy-structure admitting of two possible readings, depending on which form of the fetish’s O/otherness is emphasized: its epistemological unknowableness, or its ontological unknowableness. As I have argued, the Freudian and Marxian first-encounter narratives emphasize the fetish’s epistemological unknowableness by denying any ontological difference between the fetish object and natural objects except on the basis of their symbolic significance for the fetishist. In effect, they explain the problem of fetishism by assuming the existence of *the fetishist* from the outset. As a result, the vicious character of the narrative loop they create is one in which the fetishist is charged with becoming both his own cause and effect. Žižek makes a similar observation about capitalism’s origin-story, the myth of “primitive accumulation,” which presumes the existence of the capitalist from the start:

Within this framework, “so-called primitive accumulation” is nothing but the *ideological myth* produced by capitalism retroactively to explain its own genesis and, at the same time, to justify present exploitation: the myth of the “diligent saving worker” who did not immediately consume his surplus but wisely reinvested it in production and thus gradually became a capitalist [. . .]. Like every myth, this is circular--it presupposes what it purports to explain: the notion of the capitalist. It “explains” the emergence of capitalism by presupposing the existence of an agent who “acts like a capitalist” from the very beginning. (211)

Whether we view Marx's theory of commodity fetishism as a dialectical "going through" the form of this fantasy for purposes of *revealing* capitalism's own narrative masking of origins, as does Žižek, or as an ideological "countersigning" of that mythical procedure, as does Baudrillard, the fact remains that Marx's theory presupposes the historicity of the fetish which it portrays as *concealed* within advanced capitalist societies. In an even more direct manner, Freud's theory of fetishism *presupposes* the existence of the fetishist: "Why some people become homosexual as a consequence of that impression [castration], while others fend it off by creating a fetish, and the great majority surmount it, we are frankly not able to explain" ("Fetishism" 154). One should resist succumbing to Freud's suggestion that the fetishist's peculiar reaction to castration might be explained with more attention to "all the factors at work" in it ("Fetishism" 154). Davis's reading, which pays close attention to those factors, nonetheless reveals, upon close examination, that the fetish is constituted by the fetishist's always already having "looked at" the object in a fetishistic way. Fixated looking, as the constitutive act of fetish-formation, necessitates the existence of someone who acts like a fetishist from the start. By situating an "impossible gaze" in the originating gap of the first-encounter narrative, Marx and Freud deny the unrepresentable materiality of the fetish--what we might call its ontological unknowability--by affirming the unknowability of the subjective gaze itself.²³

In both theories, the historical implications of this strategic overwriting come to light in the "second sight," which performatively creates the distanced approach to the fetish object by instituting a distinction between form and content, transforming the fetish's ontological difference from other objects (its magical materiality) into a problem

of signification. The theorist can claim to discern the history of fetishes in *general* because their formal structure or meaning is the same, whether established as an equivalence in terms of labour time, as in Marx, or as a phallic substitute, as in Freud. But this historical authority depends on a retroactive disavowal (in the psychoanalytic sense of both affirming and denying) of the “interest” or fixatedness of the pretheoretical gaze. Here again, I call attention to the importance of Davis’s emphasis on *disinterest* within Freud’s theory, because it points up an essential aspect of the distanced perspective: such an approach must assume, from the outset, that the fetishist is actually capable of *losing interest* in the desired object. It is the idea of a possible forgetting of the object of interest that grounds, retrospectively, the effort to portray the fetish as itself a *forgetting* of some other object or historical movement. In Marx, as we have seen, that loss of interest is manifested in the deepest mystification of the commodity form, the second level of forgetting whereby the fetish’s own magic is made to appear natural or unexceptional. But the magic of Marx’s *narrative* is its rhetorical disavowal of that pre-theoretical--or indeed *disinterested*--engagement with the commodity that opens his theory (and on which his model of scientific analysis depends). In Freud, the fetish does not conceal its magic from the fetishist in this way, but its constitution as a *compromise* between reality and imagination requires for its coherence the possibility of the fetishist losing interest in the real site of the female genitals, which is his original goal. Robert Stoller, who describes the sexual fetish as a “story masquerading as an object,” articulates the myth of the forgotten fetish explicitly when he argues that, “if the text becomes conscious, the fetish no longer in itself causes excitement, is no longer a fetish” (156). If

the fetishist cannot remember a time when he or she was not interested in the specific fetish object, then the assumption of a future in which the fetish could itself be forgotten serves to produce, retroactively, an originary moment in which disinterest *became* interest, in which the fetish was formed.

The problem, in privileging the distanced perspective on fetishism, then, is to counter the absorbed belief in the magic of the fetish with a belief in the magic of *forgetting*. At the level of explanatory narrative, this requires a rhetorical “performance” of forgetting that will serve to demonstrate both what the fetishist has left behind (i.e. a real historical past) as well as to preserve that past from contamination by fetishism itself. As we saw in Marx and in Davis’s reading of Freud, that rhetorical performance consists in splitting the fetish into ontologically-distinct halves, securing one aspect outside and one inside the narrative of fetishism’s origins. This rhetorical splitting gives the illusion of having started at some point outside the narrative which has been partially forgotten; but the result of this effort is that the historical *outside* of the text is contaminated by this procedure just as it serves to guarantee the text’s historical authority. In this regard, the narrative of fetish-formation faces what J. Hillis Miller describes as the problem of narrative beginnings:

The beginning must be both inside the story as part of its narrative and at the same time outside it, prior to it as its generative base, the father of the line of filiation, or the mothering spider from whose belly the thread is spun. If inside, then the beginning is no base, no origin. It is an arbitrary starting, like beginning a bridge in midspan, with no anchor to the shore. If outside, then the beginning is not really part of the narrative line. It is disconnected from that line, like a tower piling or abutment of no help in building this particular bridge. Any beginning in narrative cunningly covers a gap, an absence at the origin. This gap is both outside the textual line as its lack of foundation and visible within it as loose threads of

incomplete information ravelling out toward the unrepresented past.
(58-59)

Of course, first-encounter narratives of fetish formation should not be granted any special status for what they reveal about narrative origins *per se*. But Miller's narratological perspective does offer insight into why fetishism has become so popular in the postmodern context, since it is a historical discourse that has always implicitly challenged dominant narrative models of history. If, at this point, we can accept another generalization about fetish discourse--that all theories of fetishism involve disavowal as their primary linguistic strategy (Gamman and Makinen 44-45)--then the theories of Marx and Freud confront us with the possibility that fetish discourse inevitably *disavows* the ability of the fetish to stand for history. Indeed, it is tempting to say, after reviewing these theories in light of the earliest descriptions of fetish-formation, that the symbolic "castration" which traditional theories of fetishism fear, and which underlies their moralizing attitude, is the separation or cutting off of a realist historiography from correspondence to its treasured, and deeply narcissistic, belief in one whole body of history.

In this light, if postmodernist revisions of fetish theory imply the need to re-evaluate fetishism's truth as a narrative discourse about history, such revisions provide support for the answer which Derrida gives to the quintessentially postmodern question about history's "end":

How can one be late to the end of history? A question for today. It is serious because it obliges one to reflect again, as we have been doing since Hegel, on what happens and deserves the name of *event*, after history; it obliges one to wonder if the end of history is but the end of a *certain* concept of history. (*Specters* 15)

Fetishism may be attractive now because it upsets that ideal correspondence-model of history which, according to Hans Kellner, insists on conformity between historical awareness and an essentially Victorian notion of individual consciousness as continuous, rational, and fundamentally realistic (33). If we have ceased to believe in conformity along these lines, it may be time to attend, as Kellner suggests, to those changes made by psychoanalysis, physiology, and psychology to our concept of consciousness, which portray forgetting and information destruction as central to the very process of remembering.

It is just such a shift that distinguishes what John Frow, in *Time and Commodity Culture*, calls his reversible or “textual” model of cultural memory from the traditional historiography of the trace or archive. Frow’s model of memory as *writing* foregrounds the need to accept the disappearance of the past and the simultaneous possibility for telling multiple stories about it:

In such a model the past is a function of the system: rather than having a meaning and a truth determined once and for all by its status as event, its meaning and its truth are constituted retroactively and repeatedly; if time is reversible then alternative stories are always possible. Data are not stored in already constituted places but are arranged and rearranged at every point in time. Forgetting is thus an integral principle of this model, since the activity of compulsive interpretation that organizes it involves at once selection and rejection. Like a well-censored dream, and subject perhaps to similar mechanisms, memory has the orderliness and teleological drive of narrative. Its relation to the past is not that of truth but of desire. (229)

Fetishism, and its characteristic forgetting, could therefore also become the sight of what Jonathan Dollimore calls a “transgressive reinscription”—a means of rethinking history in terms of a “perverse dynamic.” Such a reinscription would transform the relationship

between remembering and forgetting from one of opposition to one of *proximity*, effecting, not the collapse of order, but “the reordering of the already known, a disclosure of a radical interconnectedness which *is* the social, but which present cultures can rarely afford to acknowledge and must instead disavow” (230). Fetishism could well be viewed as one of those “kinds of historical thought that violate the common sense of historical consciousness,” one which “attempts to escape the one-true-solution, space-and-time-bound common sense of history and to hint at a different reality that has been structured out of historical consciousness” (Kellner 54).²⁴

To attempt to liberate this perverse, fetishistic historical consciousness is the object of this study as a whole. Toward this end, an analysis of the narrative strategies employed in privileging the distanced, epistemological perspective on fetishism is valuable because it indicates possible features of a reconstructed, absorbed perspective. If one reads Marx and Freud closely, as I have attempted to do in this chapter, it becomes apparent that the fetish always stands for *two* missing objects: a phantasmatic one and a real one. The distinction between distanced and absorbed perspectives on the fetish depends on *which* lost object the narrative *performatively* loses, and which one it *constatively* loses. In the distanced perspective, the narrative movement establishes the fetish as standing for a phantasmatic loss (the female phallus in Freud, the object’s natural “use” in Marx) through the performative forgetting of the object’s materiality as the narrative’s constitutive gap.²⁵ But if this distanced approach emphasizes phantasmatic or imagined loss as the basis of the fetish’s meaning, then perhaps an absorbed approach could be hypothesized on the basis of a lost, and privileged, real. It is

possible to imagine more absorbed or *relativistic* readings of fetishism that would seek to performatively forget the phantasmatic object (beginning, as do Bersani and Dutoit, with the first appearance of the object as *already* a fetish) in order to cast the loss for which the fetish stands as the singular, material *real* itself. In this case, rather than strategically glossing over the problem of narrative origins, perhaps a formal and self-reflexive narrative *address* to that problem would serve to shelter consideration of the fetish's *truth* as a historical trace.

To return to Žižek's discussion of the psychoanalytic fantasy scene, we can hypothesize a narrated time loop which, by virtue of its privileging of an *ontological* perspective on the fetish object, would challenge what Žižek calls the "proper dimension of psychoanalysis." Such a narrative address to fetishism would take as its founding problem, its constitutive "missing link," not the fetishist but the *fetish itself*. By accepting and presupposing the idea of the fetish's unrepresentable materiality, it might be possible to recreate the fetishist's perception of the fetish as *ontologically unknowable*, as the object different from all others which controls the unfolding of history by revealing the subject's untenability as a force for symbolic mastery. Unlike the distanced reading, in which the fetish is born out of the fetishist's fixated stare, here the fetishistic subjectivity is revealed as an *effect* of the object, and epistemologically derivable from it. Where the "proper" reading of fetishism's fantasy scene constructs a moment of origins in which the fetishist impossibly witnesses his or her own birth, an improper reading might be taken as a moment of *finality* in which the fetishist recognizes what Baudrillard calls his or her "mortal transparency" (*Fatal* 114)--a death of the subject as the agent

responsible for ordering temporal experience.

This subtle shift of emphasis would enable a number of important changes. First, where the distanced approach seeks to distinguish between the fetish and the non-fetish on the basis of their value as *signs*, while preserving their ontological continuity, the absorbed approach would reverse this privilege, distinguishing between them on the basis of their status as *things*. Taking both the fetish and the non-fetish as objects capable of standing for history, the absorbed approach, believing, as does the fetishist, in the magic of the fetish, seeks to distinguish between the way in which the fetish represents or constructs history in narrative terms, relative to other objects. This distinction between the fetish and other objects would reside, not in its role as a signifier of a lost, phantasmatic object, but as the substitute for a *real* object whose absence is felt only to the fetishist. That missing object is the fetish's non-magical "double." From the perspective of the fetishist, it might actually be impossible to understand the fetish object as a non-magical thing. In this case, the performative forgetting of the generic object in the first-encounter narrative could be treated, from the fetishist's perspective, as a privileged (and real) sight of loss. But it is a loss which grants the fetish its power as a historical trace, as Bersani and Dutoit suggest: "For fetishism depends on the ambiguous negation of the real, a negation which mobilizes the desiring imagination. This negation creates an interval between the new object of desire and an unidentifiable first object, and as such it may be the model for all substitutive formations in which the first term of the equation is lost, or unlocatable, and in any case ultimately unimportant" (71). I would want to add, however, that the first object need not be unidentifiable to the fetishist from

an absorbed perspective. Instead, the gap in the real becomes clear through the various interactions between the fetishist and those who do not recognize its magic, in scenarios where, according to Freud, one is most likely to feel the advantages of his or her fixated attachment. Indeed, the absorbed approach necessitates attention to this affirmative aspect of fetishism, for the idea of a gap in the real is closed up immediately in suggestions, like that of Davis, that the fetish-object cannot ever represent exactly the ideal of the fetish-image.

In the next chapter, I shall examine the work of several theorists who have gestured, in various ways, toward unsettling the traditional epistemological dominant in fetish theory. Poststructuralist and postmodernist discussions of fetishism often emphasize the need to do away with the central aspect of both Marxian and Freudian approaches to the problem: the search for the fetish's *meaning*. For this reason, they are in accord with some of the features I have identified as important to an ontological dominant in narratives about fetishism. Reconstruction of an ontological approach to fetishism as a historical practice can best proceed once the historical tendency to theorize fetishism from within a particular epistemological framework (whether psychoanalysis or Marxist social theory) is brought under question.

Notes

1. As Taussig observes, Pietz's genealogy of the word "fetish" is "analogous to the fetish itself, in that such genealogizing assumes that the meaning of the word bears traces of epochal histories [. . .] and that, although it is these traces that endow the word [. . .] with an active social history pushing into and activated by the present, these trace meanings are nevertheless largely or completely lost to present consciousness" (225).

2. In fact, the double perspective is more clearly visible in these early narratives than in some later accounts, which tend to speak for the fetishist from the outset.

3. This notion of the "screen memory" that takes the place of the first-encounter narrative is not expressly articulated by Freud, but emerges through tracing the evolution of his thinking over a period of some twenty-two years, from *Three Essays on Sexuality* to "Fetishism." In a footnote added to the 1920 edition of the *Three Essays*, Freud criticizes Binet's acceptance of the fetishist's own first-encounter story of his interaction with the fetish:

All the observations dealing with this point have recorded a first meeting with the fetish at which it already aroused sexual interest without there being anything in the accompanying circumstances to explain the fact. Moreover, all of these 'early' sexual impressions relate to a time after the age of five or six, whereas psycho-analysis makes it doubtful whether fresh pathological fixations can occur so late as this. The true explanation is that behind the first recollection of the fetish's appearance there lies a submerged and forgotten phase of sexual development. The fetish, like a 'screen-memory', represents this phase and is thus a remnant and precipitate of it. (154)

Freud's own elaboration of a first-encounter theory of fetishism, elaborated in his essay "Fetishism" seven years later, is clearly intended as an illumination of the "forgotten phase" which Binet neglected.

4. Pavel's observation comes toward the end of a seminal study demonstrating the relevance of historical debates about possible worlds to literary theory. More up-to-date summaries of the long history of possible worlds theory--which spans the fields of philosophy, linguistics, the philosophy of science, and literary studies--can be found in Ronen 5-34 and Dolezel 2-20. Dolezel observes that, although possible worlds were originally metaphysical and transcendental (existing only in the mind of God, as per Leibnitz's *Monadology*), the last four decades have seen their evolution into purely human constructs, "manageable" rather than "maximally comprehensive" systems (14). This retooling of possible worlds as a body of philosophical inquiry has rendered it amenable to pursuing a variety of scientific and literary problems--not the least of which is the definition of postmodernist fiction, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

5. Peter Pels, following Pietz, argues for a theory of fetishism more sensitive to its threatening materiality. Pels argues, *pace* a certain constructionist theory of social value, that the fetish is “too powerful a presence to be a mere re-presentation of something else” (113). I shall examine Pels’s theory in depth in Chapter Two.

6. In this manner, early fetish discourse offers a clear picture of how the historical event becomes defined, in Western models of history, through what Robert Frykenberg calls the principle of analogy or comparability. According to this model, certain spiritual or supernatural events, as described by their perceivers, cannot be admitted into history because there is no other record of similar events to which they might be compared: “Any event that is so unique that it has no analogy and nothing with which it can be compared, by such reasoning, could not become part of known history” (15). Although Frykenberg’s analysis of this principle names only the Christian story of the Resurrection for support, its structural integrity holds, I believe, for the Enlightenment reading of fetishism as well.

7. According to Pietz,

the textual practice of these navigators *cum* merchants made three sorts of material objects paradigmatic for the conception of the true nature of material objects (and of nature itself). These were (1) the Europeans’ own relatively novel technological objects (above all, ships and navigational apparatus, surveying instruments, and firearms), (2) native objects of various animate and inanimate sorts classifiable as potential commodities, and (3) entities of no economic value but significant due to the potential danger they represented to the European trader attempting to penetrate unknown territory to obtain goods and profits. (II, 40)

8. Obviously, this is a radical simplification of the argument elaborated in *On the Plurality of Actual Worlds*, in which Blais attempts to justify the existence of multiple *actual* worlds at an ontological level. In doing so, he relies on a modified Kantian construction of the object as that which is formed by a temporal relation among objective representations. Blais’s argument ultimately justifies the plurality of actual lived worlds on the basis that individuals, given unique purposive relationships to objects, define individual times and hence the individual worlds objectively contained within those times.

Given this complex ontological argument, Blais’s use of possible worlds theory differs from that of Pavel or McHale (or Ronen and Dolezel, whose work I treat in Chapter Three). Where Pavel, McHale, and Ronen utilize possible worlds theory for the purpose of defining a descriptive ontology of narrative, Blais’s work must be situated in relation to what Ronen presents as the three basic stances on the relationship between possible states of affairs and alternate realities. Among these, the first and most radical view, associated with the philosopher David Lewis, is called *modal realism*, and posits that “all modal possibilities we might stipulate, as well as the actual world, are equally

realized in some logical space where they possess a physical existence” (Ronen 22). In this view, possible worlds are parallel worlds with their own ontological actuality. The second view, *moderate realism*, treats possible worlds as nothing but interpretive possibilities which necessarily exist within the confines of the actual world. Here, Alvin Plantinga and Saul Kripke, among others, argue that possible worlds are hypothetical situations or “ways things might have been,” rather than parallel universes. Finally, the third, *anti-realist* approach, denies the interpretive power of possible worlds, as well as their rootedness in actuality, on the basis that both depend on an unfounded idea of an accessible actual world. For Nelson Goodman, according to Ronen, “there is no way to qualify the reality of *the actual* or *the real* in relation to which other worlds present a variety of alternate possibilities” (23). Within this schematic lay-out of philosophical camps, I believe Blais (whose work is too recent to receive commentary by either Dolezel or Ronen) occupies a mediating position between the relativism of Goodman and the modal realism of Lewis. As Ronen points out, these two views are similar on the surface, but have very different ontological commitments, given that the modal realist attributes concrete existence to all worlds, while the anti-realist attributes existence to none. Blais, engaging directly with Goodman, as well as philosophers Whorf, Quine, and Putnam, attempts to push Goodman’s relativism toward an affirmation of multiple worlds, and multiple truths that is (at least superficially) akin to that of Lewis. His method for doing so is the ontological shift of perspective I have summarized above.

9. In opposition to the early modern scepticism which, according to Blais, grounds metaphysical realism, Bosman’s fetishist can be taken to exhibit an unquestioning *belief* in the object’s objective, material existence. One need only think of Descartes’ wax experiment, and its rational stripping of the object to existence as mere *extension* in space, to appreciate the hostility of such radical doubt to the possibility of singular, nongeneric objects and “magical” materiality (*Meditations* 20-22).

10. See the introduction to Brown for a brief discussion of how the affirmation of materiality *outside* discourse is, itself, both inherently fetishistic and an effort to avoid fetishism (935-36).

11. In Žižek’s reading, it is this level of fetishism’s mystification--the secret of its *form*--that is the more significant. The narrative whereby Marx attempts to uncover (or produce, as we shall see shortly) the history of this form is ultimately more “disturbing” than those material relations between people, or social relations between things.

12. G. A. Cohen, on whom I shall draw shortly, is in agreement on this point: “Fetishism is part of the price paid for the development of production sponsored by capitalism. With fetishism the form not only dominates the content but obscures it” (130).

13. See Cohen 329, note 1. Cohen goes on to point out that Marx’s thesis, which assumes that science *always* reveals a discrepancy between appearance and reality, is a naive one. For even if one accepts the crude opposition established by Marx between

observation and theory, there remain many conceivable cases in which science might reveal a reality unrepresented by appearance, but which would not necessarily discredit appearance. Cohen cites the example of water's chemical composition, the discovery of which did not subvert "innocent responses to observation" (such as the fact that water quenches fire) in the same way that the Copernican revolution challenged previous beliefs about the organization of the solar system (341-42).

Cohen's choice of water as an example is interesting in light of Thomas Kuhn's discussion of shifting scientific paradigms as indicative of possible worlds. Kuhn discusses the shift of referent of the word "water" from a natural element to a chemical compound, H_2O , beginning in 1750. In Kuhn's view, the word "water" in scientific discourse refers to different ontological referents or worlds depending on whether it is used before or after that date. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to provide a continuous history of science, since the features of a previous world, approached by the historian, may prove untranslatable into the present historian's lexicon. Thus:

Under such circumstances the only recourse is reeducation: the recovery of the older lexicon, its assimilation, and the exploration of the set of worlds to which it gives access. Causal theory provides no bridge across the divide, for the transworld voyages it envisages are limited to worlds in a single lexically possible set. And in the absence of the bridge that causal theory has sought to provide, there is no basis for talk of science's gradual elimination of all worlds excepting the real one. (31)

Within the framework of Kuhn's argument, then, Marx's attempt to ally social analysis with natural science as a means of historically resolving the rift between real and illusory worlds is doomed from the start.

14. An analysis of the commodity fetish as a historical trace supports Baudrillard's contention that, *pace* Marx, use-value is strictly comparable between objects (*Critique* 131). It is use-value that grants the fetish its ability to stand for history, in the manner of any other historical trace.

15. For a comprehensive list of these theorists, see Matlock 31, note 2. Of the close to twenty articles which she lists, the most prominent are Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1885) and Alfred Binet, "Le fétichisme dans l'amour" (1887).

16. The Editor's Note that introduces the essay "Fetishism" in the *Standard Edition* provides a complete list of these contributions. Noteworthy is the fact that the paper presented by Freud to the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society, listed as "unavailable" by the editor (and cited separately hereafter), has since seen publication, spawning a great deal of debate owing to its brief discussion of female fetishism. This paper comes under discussion in my reading of Pynchon in Chapter Four.

17. Freud's discussion of childhood sexual exploration is found in the second of his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, "Infantile Sexuality." In Part Five, "The Sexual Researches of

Childhood,” Freud describes the fundamental assumption that motivates the little boy of his 1927 essay:

It is self-evident to a male child that a genital like his own is to be attributed to everyone he knows, and he cannot make its absence tally with his picture of these other people. This conviction is energetically maintained by boys, is obstinately defended against the contradictions which soon result from observation, and is only abandoned after severe internal struggles (the castration complex). The substitutes for this penis which they feel is missing in women play a great part in determining the form taken by many perversions. (195)

18. The importance of studying fetishism had already been emphasized by Freud some twenty years earlier. In *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) he writes: “No other variation of the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest as this one, such is the peculiarity of the phenomena to which it gives rise” (153). And he would return to fetishism again in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), portraying it as a “particularly favourable subject” (203) for analyzing the splitting of the ego. See also the unfinished essay, “Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process” (1938).

19. Davis is critical of analytical uses of the term *fetishism* that invoke the psychoanalytic framework without taking sufficient care to distinguish the perversion from “obsession, voyeurism, homosexual longing, mourning, or sadism” (90). He urges that “description of particular fetishists or fetishisms [. . .] must be undertaken with an eye toward metapsychological precision and informed by actual evidence about subjective realities and identifications” (91).

20. Davis goes on to show how fetishism becomes an evolutionary “medium” between homosexuality and heterosexuality. It is this distinction which leads Davis to define fetishism as the imaginary of homosexuality, and homosexuality as the real of fetishism (106).

21. Žižek portrays the role of historical description in Marx as, itself, the essence of the dialectical strategy--a kind of metafictional recreation of the means by which capitalism attempts to *conceal* its origins through narrative. This consists in exposing the process by which the concept of “primitive accumulation” is posited as capitalism’s mythical origin:

What the dialectical presentation renders is not the closed circle but the very process of inversion--itself contingent--whereby the external, contingent presuppositions are retroactively “posited,” reordered within a synchronous circle: *in other words, the very process that generates the illusion of a closed circle*. And what, accordingly, dialectical presentation unmask is the “fetish” of an Origin by means of which the circle (the

synchronous system) endeavours to conceal its vicious character--in the case of *Capital*, the myth of “primitive accumulation” by means of which capitalism generates the story of its origins. In this sense we could say that, ultimately, dialectical analysis is nothing but a repeated “going through the fantasy” which keeps the vicious character of the circle unconcealed. (*For They Know* 213)

Marx discusses primitive accumulation in Part 8 of *Capital*, Volume 1: “The So-Called Primitive Accumulation.”

22. Thus far I have not focused explicitly on the fetish’s threat to the subject, which is a central aspect of many revisionist theories which I shall examine in the next chapter. Even in the earliest theories of fetishism, however, the fetish’s ability to blur the difference between subject and object is implied, as is evident in Hegel’s criticism of the African “projection” of human traits onto inanimate things.

23. In Marx, in particular, the effects of this epistemological emphasis are clear. Where reality, according to Cohen, becomes epistemologically unknowable under the pretheoretical gaze, the gaze itself is *ontologically* unknowable because untainted by any theoretical framework, and posited as a precondition to scientific endeavour.

24. For Kellner’s examples of alternative models of historical thought, see chapter two of his book, “Time Out: The Discontinuity of Historical Consciousness,” 26-54.

25. Here it is worthwhile to point out, again, that owing to the difference of emphasis in Marx’s and Freud’s theories (the former focusing on fetishism at the social level, the latter on the personal), this phantasmatic loss is different in each case. In Freud, the fetish substitutes and stands for the universally desired, but wholly imaginary, maternal phallus. In Marx, on the other hand, the fetish, in the most advanced capitalist societies, obscures the distinction between use- and exchange-value because its value is equated solely with its monetary price. As a result, use-value becomes a kind of phantasmatic lost quality, even though it is, for Marx, the basis of real relations between the social and natural world.

CHAPTER TWO
“POST”-FETISHES:
TOWARD AN ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FETISHISM

*Let it be first of all by their presence that objects
and gestures establish themselves, and let
this presence continue to prevail over whatever
explanatory theory that may try to enclose them
in a system of references, whether emotional,
sociological, Freudian or metaphysical.*

--Alain Robbe-Grillet, “A Future for the Novel”

In the Introduction to this study, I posited that the postmodernist interest in revising and reworking older theories of fetishism should be taken as a symptom of discontent with the portrayal of the fetish as an unhistorical or anti-historical practice. By turning to past theories of the fetish, I suggested, revisionary treatments of fetishism become implicated in a kind of historical reversal or compensation for a present postmodern “lack of historicity.” In Chapter One, careful readings of the earliest first-encounter theories of fetishism, as well as those of Marx and Freud, revealed important narrative strategies whereby, in those theories, the fetishist’s perspective was characterized as a special kind of historical *forgetting*. These traditional definitions, in addition to privileging the distanced or “incredulous” perspective on fetishistic practices, also foreground, I suggested, *epistemological* questions about the fetish object at the expense of recognizing its ontological difference from other objects. On the basis of this symptomatic epistemological dominant in traditional fetish theory, I posited a provisional model of an ontological narrative dominant in fetish discourse that would seek to foreground aspects of the fetish’s magical materiality as a historical “connector” between multiple worlds and multiple historical truths.

In this chapter my goal is two-fold. My first aim is to flesh out the provisional ontological perspective outlined in the previous chapter with the help of poststructuralist thinkers whose work charts the fetish's escape routes from the narratives and disciplines which have attempted to contain it. These theoretical discussions of fetishism's revenge on its own history as a discourse bring to light the epistemological and ontological shifts of emphasis necessary in privileging an affirmative account of fetishistic practice. Then, as my second objective, I shall seek to fortify my earlier thesis that postmodernist revisions of fetish theory are symptomatic of a general dissatisfaction with fetishism's traditional reduction to a practice of historical *forgetting*. To prove this thesis, I shall examine contributions representing the most recent trend in fetish theory: the trend toward *affirmation* of fetishism as a theory and practice useful to postmodern conceptions of commodity-exchange, identity politics, and materialist analysis. As we shall see, this postmodern theoretical tendency, while owing much to poststructuralist analyses of fetish discourse, has not pushed the ontological implications of those poststructuralist accounts to their most radical historical or narrative potential.

To begin this analysis, poststructuralist contributions by Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and Baudrillard will be examined for the way in which each attends to fetishism as a practice which confounds traditional epistemological approaches to the object, and implies the need for an alternative approach. Beginning with Derrida's reading of Hegelian and Freudian fetishism, I will present the concept of an oscillating "generalized fetishism" in *Glas* as expressive of the inability to fix fetishism, as practice or discourse, within any single speculative reading. Derrida's discussion of Freudian fetishism will

pave the way for my analysis of the fetish as a “desiring-machine” in Deleuze and Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari’s rejection of psychoanalytic lack at the heart of desiring-production, I will argue, effects a crucial shift of emphasis from distanced toward more absorbed models of fetishism as a historical practice. Essential aspects of this “rhizomatic” model of history come to light in Deleuze and Guattari’s second co-authored book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, which I treat briefly at the close of this section. The Deleuzian emphasis on alternative models of temporal understanding then leads me to the work of Jean Baudrillard, in which I find two distinct theories of fetishism. The first of these is Baudrillard’s much-discussed general fetishism of the code, in which desire is operationalized according to an ideological process whereby sign logic replaces symbolic ambiguity. The second model, by contrast, emerges in Baudrillard’s later work on the “pure object,” and offers a new reading of the fetish as the last thing *resisting* a general exchange economy. In this second theory, the fetish becomes a “fatal” object with the ability to shut down epistemological inquiry, taking revenge on the subject and occasioning a new form of historical understanding which Baudrillard calls *destiny*. Interpreting this theory in light of Judith Butler’s discussion of materiality and its temporalization in *Bodies that Matter*, I argue that Baudrillard offers a provisional model for understanding the structure of historical experience from the perspective of the fetishist.

Throughout my reading of these poststructuralist philosophers, I shall attempt to draw out the implications of their theoretical contributions with regard to fetishism as a historical practice. This will require more elaboration in some cases than in others, for

fetishism is not the central focus of discussion in either Baudrillard's later work, or in Deleuze and Guattari. Nevertheless these contributions draw into bold relief some of the aspects of an ontological approach to fetishism which I outlined at the end of Chapter One. For this reason they offer a valuable template within which to evaluate the historical potential of the most recent trend in fetish theory, which is the postmodern turn toward affirmation of fetishism.

In presenting contemporary fetish theory as, itself, a symptom of the postmodern, I take as my point of departure the opening pages of Frederic Jameson's seminal essay, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." There, the ability of postmodern visual art to foreclose hermeneutical options is established, in part, through a description of Andy Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes" as both Marxian and Freudian fetishes. Given the tremendous influence of Jameson's article, I argue that this conflation of theoretical paradigms centering on the fetish, as well as the corresponding "lack of depth" or historicity which such a conflation forebodes, is crucial in determining the relationship of fetishism to postmodernism. The inability of earlier, and specifically modernist, theories of fetishism to adequately rehistoricize the postmodern art object implies the exhaustion of fetishism's use as a discourse for buttressing or upholding former models of history or teleology. At the same time, however, I posit that it is this historical failure that inspires the move toward *affirming* fetishism from the previously buried perspective of the fetishist.

To support this thesis, I offer an analysis of three affirmative approaches to fetishism which attempt to side, at least in part, with the fetishist's point of view. Each of

these models defines fetishism in relation to a particular theoretical trend within postmodernism, and argues for a rethinking of the fetish's largely negative historical past. Robert Miklitsch's notion of a "critical-affirmative" model of commodity fetishism remains for the most part true to the disciplinary treatment of fetishism as a commodity in the economic sphere, although, as we shall see, it does borrow from psychoanalytic constructions of the fetish. Miklitsch's emphasis on the need to consider the movements of *desire* within the circulation of commodities complicates any purely linear relationship of production to consumption, and hence liberates reversibility as a potential historical/temporal movement. Peter Pels's much shorter discussion of the history of the fetish and its relation to the seventeenth century discourse on rarities owes much to Pietz's genealogy of the fetish; but it foregrounds, moreso than Pietz, the need to respect the fetish object's material otherness. Calling attention to fetishism's material subversion of representation and Western epistemology, Pels's work resonates with Baudrillard's definition of the fatal object. Finally, E. L. McCallum's derivation of a "sympathetic epistemology" of fetishism from Freud's 1927 essay is the most clearly affirmative model of fetishism to date; but it is also, surprisingly, the one most hostile to an ontological approach to fetishism. My analysis of McCallum's work assesses the effects of this denial of ontology, and shows how such a denial reinstates many of the binary distinctions and categories which McCallum sets out to disrupt. Not coincidentally, this theoretical tension surfaces most conspicuously when McCallum translates her treatment of fetishism out of the realm of identity politics into a generalized epistemological strategy--a movement grounded in what I shall venture to call a reductively *modernist*

reading of Toni Morrison's postmodernist novel, *Beloved*.

McCallum's turn toward fiction as a support for her "sympathetic" methodology shall then pave the way for some final remarks on the role of history within postmodern, affirmative models of fetishism. I shall conclude this chapter, and Part One of my study, by suggesting that the construction of a truly absorbed perspective on fetishism as a discourse about history requires a narrative form better capable than these theories of reflecting the fetish's ontological difference from other objects, and its ability to unite descriptive ontologies of multiple worlds and multiple histories. Ultimately, I shall suggest that an affirmative perspective on fetishism as a historical practice is best exemplified within a discourse, like postmodernist fiction, which formally reflects postmodernism's "ontological turn."

Poststructuralist Fetishes: Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard

Derrida's concept of a general fetishism in *Glas* proceeds, like Pietz's general theory, from an analysis of early modern definitions of the African fetish. Beginning with Kant and Hegel, Derrida approaches the constitution of fetishism as a philosophical problem of the "already," a problem of a "fetish-value" the destruction of which is the project of both the founders and destroyers of Western religion (206). By virtue of Kant's relegation of religion to the confines of "simple reason," the attack on fetishism becomes essential to the historical evolution of religion itself: "The teleological horizon of 'true and unique religion' is the disappearance of the fetish" (207). In Derrida's reading, Hegel takes this teleological necessity even further than Kant, and places the

fetish and fetishist completely *outside* history, as we have seen. Yet as Derrida points out, the fetish against which Hegelian history defines itself is only ever present to Western thought through a speculative process that internalizes the fetish's "ahistoricity" as *negativity*, as "already" a resistance to the dialectical economy within which history's truth is unveiled:

In its strictly religious sense (that of which the President des Brosses speaks), the fetishistic type is, according to *Reason in History*, African. More precisely, this type belongs to inner Africa. That is to say, if *the logical schema* of the analysis is *extracted*, to an unconscious that does not let itself be dialectized as such, that has no history, that hardheadedly keeps itself on the threshold of the historico-dialectical process. But this nondialecticalness, this ahistoricity can always be interpreted as negativity, as resistance proper to the dialectic economy, and consequently interned in the speculative process. (207)

As a result, the logical analysis of fetishism reveals a speculative oscillation at work between a dialectics and an undecidability. And it is this oscillation that forces philosophical speculation to play between two different concepts of the fetish.¹

On the one hand, Derrida locates what he calls an "invariant predicate" of the fetish, common to all its theoretical manifestations. This predicate grounds fetishism within a decidable economy of opposition, in which the fetish is always the substitute for a central signifier or function. As a substitute, the fetish takes the place of the center function of the system, whether occupied by God in a religious economy, or by the phallus in psychoanalysis. By this determination, the fetish is opposed to the central truth for which it substitutes, and disappears with the unveiling of that thing itself, the only non-substitute. Such a logic of opposition, a "space of good sense," makes the fetish into a sub-set of the signifier: "from then on every fetish is a signifier, while every signifier is

not necessarily a fetish” (209). For fetishism to make sense at all, it must constrain itself to this opposition of original to substitute, the basis of its decidable value.

Yet according to Derrida, there is also, in any discourse on fetishism, a second concept of the fetish which escapes the relationship enforced by the invariant predicate.

Derrida finds the traces of this second concept most evident in Freud:

If what has always been called fetish, in all the critical discourses, implies the reference to a nonsubstitutive thing, there should be somewhere--and that is the truth of the fetish, the relation of the fetish to truth--a decidable value of the fetish, a decidable opposition of the fetish to the nonfetish [. . .]. And yet here is the headless head, there would be perhaps, particularly in Freud, enough not to make fly into pieces [*voler en éclats*] but to reconstruct starting from its generalization a “concept” of the fetish that no longer lets itself be contained in the space of truth, in the opposition *Ersatz/nonErsatz*, or simply in the opposition. (209)

This new undecidable fetish “begins to exist only insofar as it begins to bind itself to contraries” (227)--a binding performed, in Freud, on two levels. At the level of Freud’s case studies, this binding is established through the process of disavowal which allows the fetish to stand as both a signifier of woman’s lack of a penis, as well as the denial of that lack. And on the level of Freud’s text itself, the fetish becomes so bound through “heterogeneous statements” about the fetish which refuse to be cast in contradiction or opposition to one another. This heterogeneity becomes evident, according to Derrida, in the difference between Freud’s *story* of the little boy beneath his mother’s skirt, which establishes, through the perception of castration, a decidable economy of the fetish as a penis-substitute, and Freud’s *speculation* on the “subtle cases” used to support this theory.

In particular, Derrida calls attention to Freud’s discussion (toward the end of his

essay on fetishism) of a particular patient who had a fetish for athletic support belts, which completely concealed the genitals and could be worn by a man or a woman. Such a fetish, Freud speculates, is born out of both an affirmation and denial of castration, and serves to signify both:

Analysis showed that it signified that women were castrated and that they were not castrated; and it also allowed of the hypothesis that men were castrated, for all these possibilities could equally well be concealed under the belt--the earliest rudiment of which in his childhood had been the fig-leaf on a statue. A fetish of this sort, doubly derived from contrary ideas, is of course especially durable. ("Fetishism" 156-57)

Derrida reads this analysis as implicating the fetish in a new economy of the undecidable--an economy in which the fetish is constructed *at once* on the assertion and denial of castration, preventing any "cutting-through" to a decision on castration (210). This inability to "cut through" to a decidable status of the fetish forms a general fetishism through its retrospective revising of the previous relation between substitute and nonsubstitute penis: "Why *general* fetishism? As soon as the economy of the undecidable secures for the fetish its greater solidity, as Freud recognizes, its lesser stability already presupposes some liaison to opposed interests" (210-11). And it is within this general fetishism that a "strict fetishism"--the fetishism of metaphysics, which takes the substitute *for* the thing-itself--is contained.

Ultimately, the fetish's unique power resides in this ability to withstand the "cut" to which all economies based on truth are subject. Although Derrida bases his elaboration of a general fetishism on a speculation that "loses on both sides," the "mobility" of the fetish is conceived of as an oscillation between its two contrary functions, an oscillation that cannot be arrested at any one position and which "affirms

with a limitless yes, immense, prodigious, inaudible” (228). Conceived of as both a structural and a psychoanalytic “operation,” the castration always avoided by the fetish is deferred inevitably because of this oscillating play:

That does not mean (to say) that there is no castration, but that this *there is* does not take place. There is that one cannot cut through to a decision between the two contrary and recognized functions of the fetish, any more than between the thing itself and its supplement. Any more than between the sexes. (229)

As we shall see in Chapter Four, this last observation about undecidability in Freud has proven important in efforts to theorize female fetishism. Yet the delineation of a general fetishism is equally important to studies of fetishism as a historical narrative, for two reasons. First, Derrida’s analysis of the ahistorical African perspective buried within early modern theories of religion emphasizes how Western theories of history-- particularly that of Hegel--depend on that ahistoricity redefined as an opposition, as an *outside* against which the *inside* of true historical consciousness defines itself. Second, and more importantly, by delineating a general fetishism out of heterogeneous statements in Freud’s text, Derrida reveals how the fetish’s refusal to be contained within the logic of the opposition enables a retroactive resurrection of that ahistorical perspective. The fetish’s refusal, in this general economy, to remain bound to castration also marks the refusal to be bound to a single origin, or a single narrative of history. If we accept Sarah Kofman’s reading of this fetishistic oscillation as the opening of a space “in which literature originates” (“Ça Cloche 124), then it becomes possible to see the fetish as enabling alternative conceptions of history that do not relate to one another in oppositional terms, as true or false, but as heterogeneous statements, each equally viable

as fictions. Derrida's reading of Freud's 1927 essay, which calls attention to its heterogeneity of descriptive case studies and theoretical speculation, suggests that the first-encounter theory of fetishism is always implicated in what we have come to think of as a Derridean or deconstructive attack on totalizing models of history *through* narrative. In a sense, fetish theory reveals what Mark Currie describes as the specifically *narratological* power of the concept of supplementarity:

To use Derridean language, narrative history is often constructed around an opposition between an origin and a supplement, or that which comes later, so that the story is one of loss of innocence or original purity. [. . .] Derrida's term *supplementarity* can be thought of as a narratological concept in so far as it names the counter-logic to this narrative logic, disrupting the linearity and the exclusion on which it depends. This counter-logic is as follows: the supplement does not follow from the origin except in terms of the metaphysical concept of time; the supplement is not added on later but is 'a possibility [which] produces that to which it is said to be added on'. In other words the possibility of what comes later is the origin of the origin, so that the origin always contains within it the mark of what is to come. Or, to use another Derridean phrase, the fall from presence has *always already* occurred, and the idea of some undivided originary presence which precedes difference is a delusion foisted on us by narrative. (83-84)

If the decidable status of the fetish relegates it to a function of signification, as Derrida makes clear, then the *undecidable* function of the fetish as *supplement* enables it to slip beyond the strict regime of meaning or truth, into the regime of the trace.

Thus it may be that fetish theory (in Freud or Hegel) offers an absorbed or ontological perspective on the fetish to the extent that it presents what Derrida calls a "strict" fetishism (the treatment of the fetish as the *thing itself*), as the perspective of the *fetishist*. As Derrida points out, this strict fetishism must remain interned within a general fetishism; but this is only to say that any account of fetishism must embody its

definitive twinned perspectives. This confinement does not preclude strict fetishism from receiving an ontological emphasis denied in previous distanced readings of fetishism in Western philosophy. In this regard, the apparent absurdity of arguing that Derrida paves the way for an ontological perspective on fetishism (given his repeated attacks on Western metaphysics and its ontotheological tradition) is softened if we recall the distinction I made in Chapter One between metaphysical and descriptive ontologies. If Derrida accuses Western metaphysics of “strict fetishism,” it is because philosophy does not recognize--or else seeks to conceal--its magical thinking in taking the fetish *for* the thing itself. As Gayatri Spivak, in her reading of *Glas*, writes:

The project of philosophy, Derrida concludes, as each philosopher presents a more correct picture of the way things are, is not merely to locate the fetish in the text of the precursor, but also to de-fetishize philosophy. [. . .] Rather than negating the thing itself--that would merely be another way of positing it--deconstruction gives it the undecidability of the fetish. The thing itself becomes its own substitute. Like the faked orgasm, the thing itself is its own fake. (178)

But as Spivak goes on to say, in order for the fetish to qualify *as* a fetish, it must bear some trace of what it substitutes for. This places Derrida in the position, which he acknowledges, of presenting *Glas* as the “thing itself,” the philosophical book as awe-inspiring text (177-79). As a philosopher, then, Derrida cannot escape that strict fetishism which he criticizes; but in acknowledging fetishism as his own, Derrida takes a step toward *affirming* it. This affirmation consists in acknowledging the fetish’s ability to stand *for* truth, while not definitely *signifying* a particular referent beyond itself. Zeroing in on this affirmation, Spivak observes, “Perhaps Derrida speaks from the irretrievably compromised position of a man with a self-diagnosed fetish (can there be such a thing?)

that substitutes nothing but the trace of a truth (if there could be such a thing)” (183).

What I am calling an ontological orientation to the historical truth of fetishism thus differs from the standard philosophical and epistemological approach precisely because it does not seek to arrest the fetish’s oscillating movement. Instead, taking the fetish’s relationship to historical truth as its blindspot or its constitutive origin, strict fetishism in the Derridean sense becomes a narrative strategy for short-circuiting philosophical and historical arguments which attempt to confine the fetish to a “space of good sense,” enabling a proliferation of historical and theoretical descriptions.

In describing the fetish as a substitute for itself, then, Derrida’s theory resonates with what I presented, at the end of the previous chapter, as an essential strategy for liberating the fetish’s buried historicity: it acknowledges the magical fetish as a substitute, in the real, for *itself* as a non-magical thing. But Derrida does not take us very far toward understanding the nuances of this absorbed perspective. Conspicuously absent from his account is any address to the fetish’s essential *materiality*. For a theory which pays greater attention to the potential of that threatening materiality, I turn now to the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari provide a framework within which to consider the fetish as integral to a materialist conception of desire. In the *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari develop a theory of desire as a force of production arising out of a schizoid revolutionary flow which is the “irrational of every form of rationality” (*Anti-Oedipus* 379), and which functions according to a set of binary connections and passive syntheses which have no reference either to a lost historical

unity, or to any emergent totality (*Anti-Oedipus* 324). By this model, the fetish becomes a manifestation of desiring-machines which function in the same way that they are formed, and in which the identity between production and product comes marks the definitive end of interpretation. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “[d]esire makes its entry with the general collapse of the question ‘What does it mean?’” (*Anti-Oedipus* 109). The disruption of causality and the collapse of the hermeneutic gesture reveal a conception of the subject reduced to a residuum of the workings of desire as it establishes its connections on an unrepresentable socius, or body without organs. In this manner, Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring-machines are set to break down normative teleologies of sexual development, and to dismantle the psychoanalytic establishment of global “personhood” based on castration-anxiety and lack.

In their first co-authored book, *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari are quite explicit about the importance of re-orienting the study of the fetish away from a discussion of its *meaning* toward its *use* and *functioning*, as an index of the way in which the social field is directly invested by desire. Accordingly, the first step in effecting this reorientation is to stop asking whether the essence of any particular fetishistic practice is specifically sexual, economic, or religious in nature (182). In their eyes such questions remain at the level of exegesis because they always assume a fundamentally psychoanalytic conception of sexuality and libidinal investment, in which the large economic or political *social machines* or *molar aggregates* are considered separate from (even when applicable to) an intimate family sphere which entirely contains the secret of the libido (183). Against this exegetical tendency, and in keeping with their portrayal of

the unconscious as a factory which is “not expressive or representative, but productive” (181), Deleuze and Guattari propose a recognition of the fetish as the direct investment of the social by the molecular working of sexuality:

[D]esiring-machines are precisely that: the microphysics of the unconscious, the elements of the microunconscious. But as such they never exist independently of the historical molar aggregates, of the macroscopic social formations that they constitute statistically. In this sense, there is only desire and the social [. . .]. Desiring-machines function within social machines, as though they maintained their own régime in the molar aggregates that they form at the level of large numbers. Symbols and fetishes are manifestations of desiring-machines. (183)

In this model, as in Derrida and Pietz, the focus is on the “primitive” religious fetish; but here, any attempt to read that fetish as an indication of relations between the social and the personal is doomed to failure because reading itself constitutes a denial of desire as a *productive* force. To assess the relationship established by the fetish between the personal and the social is to stop thinking of the fetish as a representation in the first place, and instead to regard it as a desiring-machine producing both the social and the personal in their own registers. In this regard, the fetish does not serve to *express* a particular model of desire or social order (as in the case of the earliest Western writings about fetishism, according to Pietz); rather, it is the working tool and end product of that desiring-production. In order to understand this dual role of the fetish, however, it is necessary to examine more closely the workings of desiring-production itself.

In the *Anti-Oedipus*, desiring-production is defined as the sole function of an unconscious conceived of as a factory, in which desiring-machines are coupled together in binary associations, one machine producing a continuous flow which is interrupted or cut off by the machine connected to it in an ongoing linear series. As such, desiring-

production is simply the production of production in the endless connections of flows and partial objects which interrupt those flows: “Every ‘object’ presupposes the continuity of a flow; every flow, the fragmentation of the object” (6). By “objects” here Deleuze and Guattari refer to distinct material beings or things that are by nature partial or fragmented. A favourite image of the desiring-machine in operation is that of the mother nursing her child, in which the breast becomes a partial object producing a flow of milk which is “cut off” by the next partial object in the linear series, the baby’s mouth. Desire, in this model, “causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows” (5); thus desire is both the productive force behind the desiring-machines, as well as their functioning and their end product, signalling a fundamental identity between production and product. This producing/product identity itself then forms a third term in the series established by desiring-production, an “enormous undifferentiated object” (7) or body without organs, on which the linear connections of the partial objects come to attach themselves. Taken together, this body without organs, and the partial objects attached to it, are “the two material elements of the schizophrenic desiring-machines: the one as the immobile motor, the others as the working parts” (327).

It is essential to note that for Deleuze and Guattari, desiring-machines and their operation are not merely metaphorical in nature, but rather, mechanisms that formalize real operations of desire in the material world (41). As such, “partial objects do not refer in the least to an organism that would function phantasmatically as a lost unity or a totality to come” (324). This keeps them removed from a system in which a part-object, such as the phallus in psychoanalysis, is detached from a signifying chain in order to

serve as the guarantor of meaning through difference. In opposition to this “crushing operation,” Deleuze and Guattari identify partial objects as capable of blowing up the Oedipal framework (44) because they form the functioning parts of desiring-machines which are *anoedipal* in nature. Accordingly, to conceive of partial objects as the really distinct material entities envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari is to grant desire, as production/product, primacy over the notion of autonomous individuals. Hence:

Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression. Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. (26)

But what becomes of the subject in this conflation of the object with desire?

The subject, it turns out, emerges as a kind of “consumer” of the connections and detachments effected by the desiring-machine, but in a location, and a relation, that requires attention to the second material element of these machines, the body without organs. This “body” is defined by Deleuze and Guattari primarily in the negative:

The body without organs is not the proof of an original nothingness, nor is it what remains of a lost totality. Above all, it is not a projection; it has nothing whatsoever to do with the body itself, or with an image of the body. It is the body without an image. (8)

This body without an image is conceived of as a whole existing alongside the parts of desiring-production, but in such a manner that it neither unifies nor totalizes them (43). Instead, it acts as an undifferentiated material surface on which the process of desiring-production is recorded, and to which the partial objects become joined in a series of new syntheses. Ultimately, this recording surface proves fetishistic in its ability to seemingly appropriate the entire process of desiring-production for itself (12). And it is on this

recording surface that the subject emerges as a consumer of the fetishistic movement: “It is a strange subject, however, with no fixed identity, wandering about over the body without organs, but always remaining peripheral to the desiring-machines, being defined by the share of the product it takes for itself [. . .]” (16). In the process of its consumption, the subject experiences a series of “intensities” through which it is constantly killed and reborn. If schizophrenia is the process of the production of desire in and through the desiring-machines (24), then this subject which emerges on the recording surface can be called the schizophrenic.

This schizophrenic subject, however, is very different from the autistic persona described by psychoanalysis. The schizo’s predominant characteristics as delimited in the *Anti-Oedipus* are, first, an undecidable sexuality, or a mixing of the sexes such that “everyone is bisexual, everyone has two sexes, but partitioned, noncommunicating” (69). Second (and more important to an ontological approach to fetishism), this unfixed subject enjoys a unique relationship with history. That relationship is defined by the subject’s ability to identify with anyone and anything in the past, and to proclaim, in the intense moment of identification, “every name in history is I [. . .]” (21). Subjective historical experience, in this model, is thus not defined in relation to an objective continuum stretching from an imaginary origin to an imaginary end. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari claim that no one has ever been as deeply involved in history as the schizo because no one else perceives history in its pure state as merely a series of intensities on the body without organs. Here history is machined out of the material base of its unrepresentable body, which refuses any triangulation of historical events in relation either to origin or

end, both of which depend on models of desire based on lack. In relation to the body without organs, each moment of historical “becoming” expresses an equal, positive value.

It might be objected, at this point, that such a model of historical experience has more to do with valorizing schizophrenia than challenging historical prejudices about fetishism. And although Deleuze and Guattari begin their second collaboration, *A Thousand Plateaus*, by addressing critical misperceptions about their affirmation of the schizo, my aim here is not to assess the implications either of their apparent endorsement of schizophrenia, or of the way in which *Anti-Oedipus* has been “misread” by those who make such accusations. Neither, for that matter, can my reading address the tenability of Deleuze and Guattari’s wholesale rejection of psychoanalysis. Instead, I want only to affirm, for now, the relevance of their model of historical “intensities” to fetishism by referring briefly to *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which they develop--if only cursorily--the idea of “becoming” in relation to perverse sexuality.

In a chapter devoted to “becoming-animal,” Deleuze and Guattari define becoming as a state which escapes the false binary of “being” versus “imitating.” As with desiring-machines, becoming-animal does not involve the literal or metaphoric transformation of a human into an animal, but rather the production of the reality of “the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that becoming passes” (238). Later, elaborating on this difficult concept, Deleuze and Guattari argue that “becoming” is a phenomenon particularly common in fetishism and masochism, and misunderstood in those specific forms by psychoanalysis (259). The primary reason for misunderstanding stems from the effort to extract from the movement

of “becoming” a single moment which arrests it, and enables a symbolic reading:

But to break the becoming-animal all that is needed is to extract a segment from it, to abstract one of its moments, to fail to take into account its internal speeds and slownesses, to arrest the circulation of affects. Then nothing remains but imaginary resemblances between terms, or symbolic analogies between relations. This segment refers to the father, that relation of movement and rest refers to the primal scene, etc. (260)

Although Deleuze and Guattari do not point to Freud’s 1927 essay specifically, it is clear that the abstraction and narrative fixation of the sight of the female genitals in Freud’s theory of fetishism can be taken as an attempt to dismiss what the fetishist sees as the fetish’s reality-producing “circulation of affects” as a symbolic fantasy-association. Privileging symbolic castration serves to contain what the fetishist perceives as a process of real historical becoming (of the experience of historical reality *as* becoming) as a purely phantasmatic movement.

To counter such misreadings, Deleuze and Guattari propose a treatment of becoming that takes into account a distinction between two different modes of time. The first of these temporal modes, which they call *chronos*, denotes “the time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form, and determines a subject” (262). This is time as it is commonly understood, as a continuous linear flow. But in addition to this mode, there is also *aeon*, “the indefinite time of the event, the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too-early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened” (262). This latter form of time, which is the domain of what Deleuze and Guattari call “haecceities,” is reminiscent of the particular temporal movement we have seen in first-encounter theories of fetishism, in which the

“first” object to appear is both already and not yet a fetish. Like that oscillating movement, a haecceity “has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination; it is always in the middle. It is not made of points, only of lines. It is a rhizome” (263).

Furthermore, the rhizomatic movement of a haecceity or a “becoming” is entirely different from the movement of history and of memory. Thus when history is cast as either a break from memory, or a model based upon it, that configuration is in fact a misreading of the real opposition, which lies between history/memory and the “transhistorical” movement of “becoming”:

History may try to break its ties to memory; it may make the schemas of memory more elaborate, superimpose and shift coordinates, emphasize connections, or deepen breaks. The dividing line, however, is not there. The dividing line passes not between history and memory but between punctual “history-memory” systems and diagonal or multilinear assemblages, which are in no way eternal: they have to do with becoming; they are a bit of becoming in the pure state; they are transhistorical. (296)

Now admittedly, *bodies-without-organs*, *becomings*, and *haecceities* may seem like strange entities on which to pin one’s hopes for an approach to the fetish more appreciative of its essential *materiality*. But when Deleuze and Guattari describe the fetish as a manifestation of a desiring-machine, they begin to shed light on that castrating movement of desire--or the turning of castration *against* itself--which is identified by Bersani and Dutoit in Freud’s theory of fetishism. Unlike that fetishistic movement in Bersani and Dutoit however, *becoming* never results in a “misreading” of fetishism’s perverse movement through fixation, because Deleuze and Guattari fiercely deny that *any* reading of desire is right or wrong. Instead, reading in itself is that which transforms becoming into the order of a history (*Thousand* 276). History, defined in this way, is

nothing but the imposition of reading on the movement of desire. To treat the fetishist's fixation on the object as an erroneous interpretation of his or her desire is therefore a category mistake of the same magnitude as the relegation of fetishism to an unhistorical practice by virtue of its investment in a forgetting of origins. Where the latter reads the fetish as the object which both commemorates and denies a real historical event, effecting an artificial opposition between memory and history, the former reads the fetish as a "false" blockage of desire that implicates desiring-production in an economy of truth or falsity that is wholly incompatible with it.

Thus while showing how the traditional demonization of fetishism as unhistorical forgetting can be challenged, Deleuze and Guattari also suggest that the truth of history is always predetermined on the (purely arbitrary) basis of which desiring-machine is chosen as the privileged object/event on which all others will depend. If, as they suggest, the fetish can operate as such a machine, then a model of history which treats the fetish as the engine of its material becoming is enabled. For this reason, I believe, it is not necessary to agree with Deleuze and Guattari about the evils of psychoanalysis in order to recognize the value of becoming to a study of fetishism. But while *A Thousand Plateaus* does mention fetishism as a perversion that illuminates the process of becoming-animal, it offers no discussion of an explicitly *fetishistic* becoming. This makes it very difficult to distinguish how (or if) fetishism might provide the basis for a historical practice distinct from that of masochism, for example, to which Deleuze and Guattari devote considerably more attention. For a theory which deals more directly with fetishism and its potential for establishing alternative models of historical understanding, I shall refer now to the

now to the work of Jean Baudrillard.

Pietz has criticized Baudrillard as a representative of poststructuralism's failure to treat fetishism as anything but a problem of ideology ("Fetishism" 122). In doing so, he refers to Baudrillard's generalized "fetishism of the code" as a model characterizing advanced capitalist states in contemporary Western culture. I want to argue, however, that a second idea of the fetish emerges in Baudrillard's later work--one that does indeed locate the fetish in a space beyond ideology's construction of the social real through sign logic. This second Baudrillardian fetish, or "pure object," is the result of a more absorbed reading of fetishistic practice which arises out of, but works against, his generalized fetishism of the code.

Baudrillard's general theory of fetishism arises from his deconstruction of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. As we have seen in Chapter One, Baudrillard reads the concept of use-value as exchange-value's practical guarantee of the real. The system projects this guarantee, or alibi, in order to excise the only *truly* incomparable property of objects, their symbolic ambivalence as gifts. In Baudrillard's early work, the liquidation of symbolic exchange in capitalist economies is paralleled by the wholesale reduction of the symbolic realm by semiotic logic. It is this parallel which allows Baudrillard to conclude that "the semiological reduction of the symbolic properly constitutes the ideological process" (*Critique* 98).

The process of semiotic reduction is analyzed in greater detail in Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. According to this text, in a fully simulated society, the practical real is no longer even Marx's concept of use-value, but, instead, political

economy itself. Through a historical “precession of simulacra,” the new order of the hyperreal posits exchange value as the alibi for commodities which now circulate only as signs, reproducing the code (31). At this level, the structural law of value which has come to dominate (existing as capitalism’s ultimate tyrannical form) creates something of a totalizing, perverse code of desire: “the perverse desire is the normal desire imposed by the social model” (110). In this manner, sexual and commodity-fetishism become bound in a generalized fetishism of the code, an ideological state governing desire in all its forms. This takes place, however, only through the circulation of the phallus as the general equivalent of sexuality. The fetishism of the code in relation to sexuality is thus that which makes “the history of the body the history of its demarcation and annihilation of its difference in order to make it a structural material for sign exchange” (101). The ambivalence liquidated in this case is the symbolic ground zero of castration, which the system substitutes with a series of staged castrations and phallic alibis. The centrality of this refusal to recognize the symbolic difference of castration should not be underestimated in Baudrillard: “The entire march of the West, ending in a vertiginous compulsion for realism, is affected by this myopia of castration” (110). Thus as Mike Gane observes, Baudrillard’s general fetishism of the code, stemming from a deconstruction of the anthropological essentialism of Marx’s commodity fetishism, nonetheless substitutes its own psychoanalytic essentialism (204).

I present this highly influential model in order to emphasize why Baudrillard’s early work does not manifest what I am calling an ontological orientation toward the fetish. Baudrillard’s fetishism of the code still proceeds from a characterization of

universal lack at the origin of fetish formation, in the form of symbolic castration. Consequently, though this model elaborates an absorbed perspective based on the fascination of the simulacrum and consumerism, the essential mystification of the symbolic relegates that practice to a mere manifestation of ideological determinism: “ideology is the process of reducing and abstracting symbolic material into a form; it is the cunning of form to veil itself continually in the evidence of content; it simultaneously produces the content and consciousness to receive it” (*Critique* 145). Absent from this model is any sense of the fetish’s ability to challenge traditional epistemological or narrative approaches to the object, or to serve as the motive force for any alternative historical experience.

In Baudrillard’s later work, however, a new kind of fetish emerges, distinct from that which he describes in relation to this fetishism of the code. In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard ponders the conditions for knowledge in Western society and notes that, though exchange itself has become the very basis of our epistemology, it has become generalized to the extent that it has inadvertently revealed the last objects unavailable for exchange. These objects, in turn, have become “the real stakes” (47). In contrast to the operationalized fetishes of his earlier work, the fetish in this “pure object” state is defined by its resistance to the exchange circuit:

The inexchangeable is the pure object, whose power forbids either possessing or exchanging it. It is something very precious that we don’t know quite how to get rid of. It burns, and isn’t negotiable [. . .]. The corpse always plays this role. Beauty, too, and the fetish as well. It has no value, but is priceless. It is an object of no interest, and at the same time absolutely singular, without equivalent, and almost sacred. (47)

In this elaboration of the “almost sacred” pure object, Baudrillard presents the initial

removal of the fetish from the general system of exchange as an irrevocable transformation. Once the object has escaped this epistemological system, it cannot be returned to it. Instead, by virtue of the object's new-found ability to capture the subject's interest--an epistemological investment which Baudrillard calls the "omnipotence of thought" (48)--the fetish becomes an illustration of the "profound objection we entertain towards normal causality" (114). As a disruption in the rational order of cause and effect, the pure object attains the "fatal" power to turn against the subject, reflecting his or her untenable position at the center of epistemological models based on oppositions like chance/order, or signifier/signified. This fatal process Baudrillard calls the "revenge of the crystal":

The possibility, the will of the subject to situate itself at the transcendental heart of the world and to think of itself as universal causality, under the sign of a law of which it remains master, this will does not prevent the subject from invoking the object secretly, like a fetish, like a talisman, like a figure of the reversal of causality, like the locus of a violent hemorrhage of subjectivity [. . .].

The entire destiny of the subject passes into the object. For universal causality, irony substitutes the fatal power of a singular object.
(114)

The substitution of the subject for the object at the center of epistemological inquiry marks the shift from what Baudrillard calls a banal to a fatal theory, or a shift from a "religion of transparency" (184), based on a subject's interpretation of objects, to a recognition that the pure object is more cunning than the subject. This, finally, is what lends the pure object its importance as a revelation of the "real stakes" involved in subverting the exchange circuit. The envelopment of the subject in fatal strategies opposes general cultural simulation not by uncovering the "secret" behind false signs, but

by attending to the impenetrable opacity of the object, whose ontological otherness dissolves meaning in the play of appearance. For Baudrillard, ultimately, false simulacra can be countered only through an affirmation of the “falsar-than-false,” a purely *seductive* regime (52).

Unlike the general fetishism of the code, then, Baudrillard’s later description of the fetish as a possible pure object does not seek to characterize the fetishist’s attachment to the object in relation to any previous discourse on lack--unless it is the subject’s own lack of faith in epistemological and causal models. Instead, the subject’s seduction by the object provides the only possible escape from the “terror” of psychoanalytic law predicated on castration (142)--the fundamental mystification, as we have seen, of general simulation. But, as in Deleuze and Guattari, the price to be paid for this restoration of the object’s subversive *power*, in place of its psychoanalytic *meaning*, is the dissolution of the subject itself. Fatal strategies depend on a recognition of the disappearance of the subject on the horizon of the object (114), which can be observed only by carrying rational epistemological models to the point of their inevitable breakdown. The existence of the fetish, as testament to subjectivity’s *desire* to dissolve itself in contemplation of the object, is not in itself a guarantee of that dissolution. According to Baudrillard, it is not enough to hold faith in the fact that no one can elude the miraculous moment of fetish-formation, the “experience of investing an object, as an object, with all the occulted force of objectivity” (115). Engagement with the fatal demands that the subject draw every epistemological consequence of the object’s revenge, bringing all the powers of rational interrogation to bear in order that the object, in defiance of all such inquiry, may ensnare

the subject in its own fatal logic.

It is here that Baudrillard's discussion of the pure object takes on a dimension particularly important to a study of fetishism as a historical practice. For the logic in which the subject comes to be ensnared by the fetish is that of *predestination*, in which "the sign of the apparition of things is also the sign of their disappearance" (157).

Denying the rational assumption that the only connections possible between events are causal connections (an assumption to which even chance, according to Baudrillard (157), is given over), the epistemology of destiny is grounded in the perception of fatal linkages between events established by the recurrence of a single sign. These linkages are fatal, rather than causal, because the sign governing their connection is meaningless: the sign-as-destiny is the result of the subject's failed effort to "read" the object's revenge as a significant event, and to treat the fetish as if it possessed a metaphoric depth. Thus "[i]t's always like this that destiny becomes specific: at a given moment, at a given point, signs become objects, impossible to turn into metaphors, cruel, without appeal. They cut short any decipherment, become confused with things [. . .]" (122). And these object-signs, because they oppose both the rational and the accidental, blur the distinction between historical beginnings and endings by coming to preside over both. Destiny is therefore the acceptance of being "born under a sign" in the moment of the object's revenge--a birth that is also a death for the subject, erasing any rational history in favour of a ceremonial, predestined interconnection of events.

It is this idea of a fatally seductive object that leads Best and Kellner to call Baudrillard the "supreme fetishist of the object world" (132), and not without reason. For

the distinction Baudrillard makes between rational history and ceremonial destiny marks out very clearly the dual paths of distanced incredulity and absorbed involvement along which any discourse on the fetish must travel. Within the evolution of Baudrillard's thinking, it becomes possible to see a shift of focus with regard to the fetish, from an early, distanced approach, which analyzes the role of fetishism's *mystifying* power within a larger historical "precession" of simulacra, to his later, more absorbed fatal theory, which treats fetishistic seduction as a game of rules rather than interpretation.

Baudrillard's idea of predestination is thus particularly valuable in the search for absorbed models of fetishism because it provides a means of viewing history through the eyes of the fetishist. No longer privileging a monolithic "total historical reality" within which fetishism must be contextualized, destiny offers a ritualized, absorbed *construction* of history controlled by the ritual recurrence of the fetish itself. Against the "eternal delay" of a history predicated on meaning (162), on a first cause and a final effect, the fetish constructs, for the fetishist, a reversible history in which cause and effect are rendered indistinguishable by the fatal appearance of the pure object, which (like Deleuze and Guattari's desiring-machine) arrogates all connections between events to itself.

Furthermore, Baudrillard's concept of predestination also implies dependence on a fundamentally ontological orientation to the fetish object. If the fetish is able to unseat the subject as the source and master of epistemological inquiry, it is because it defies the Western philosophical and scientific assumption that nature is humanity's "other" only in an epistemological sense. The fetish refuses to succumb to the epistemological speculation that would attribute a hidden meaning or secret to it--a secret which secures

its own inevitable disclosure in advance. Instead, faced with the pure object that refuses to become a sign, epistemology must recognize the ontological singularity and otherness of the fetish. It must therefore seek, as Baudrillard writes,

No longer to explain things and to set their value in objective criteria and in an unbounded system of references, but, on the contrary, to implicate the whole world in a single one of its details, an entire event in a single one of its features, all the energy of nature in a single one of its objects, dead or alive--to find the esoteric ellipsis, the perfect shortcut toward the pure object, the one which is not involved in the division of meaning, and which shares its secret and power with no other. (115)

Viewed in summary, Baudrillard's description of a pure object simultaneously of and beyond the generalized exchanges of the social brings us perhaps closer to an affirmation of the fetish's threatening materiality than any other theory we have examined thus far. It does so by suggesting the interrelatedness of temporality and materiality which epistemology always assumes. Here it is worthwhile to refer to Judith Butler's observation that, in Western philosophy, "matter [. . .] is neither a simple, brute positivity or referent nor a blank surface or slate awaiting an external signification, but is always in some sense temporalized" (*Bodies* 31). This temporalization is constitutive of materiality itself in the sense that the material is defined only through *materialization*, "where the principle of materialization is precisely what "matters" about that body, its very intelligibility" (Butler, *Bodies* 32).

I have argued, in the previous chapter, that the materiality of the fetish in Marx and Freud is overwritten through a narrative performance that both depends upon, and yet denies, the constitutive necessity of that materiality. In other words, to use Butler's language, "what matters" about the fetish, in its most famous definitions, is its ability to

conceal its own temporal/historical materialization. The fetish is, in this sense, always “de-materialized” as a result of rendering it an object amenable to epistemology. With the refusal of this epistemological meaning, however (a refusal which, in various ways, the theories of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and Baudrillard all describe), the fetish’s materiality returns with a vengeance, as that which does not--indeed *cannot--*“matter.” The fetishist encounters the fetish’s materiality *as* a temporal/historical experience, as an intensity or moment of *becoming* which cannot be rendered intelligible through incorporation into a larger chronological or teleological order. As a desiring-machine, the fetish literally produces history through/as its essential materiality. In this private intensity, materiality is revealed *as* a historical relation between subject and object, subverting the clear (epistemological) distinction between them.

Ultimately, it is only in light of this subversion that one can appreciate the impact of Baudrillard’s description of the pure object as that which *refuses* to become a sign. If it is the assumption of epistemology that objects give up the secret of their materiality (that is, *become* material) through their transformation into signs, then the fetish casts itself as ontologically unknowable by refusing what Derrida calls the speculative “cutting” through to a decision on that transformation. The pure object fetish, in Baudrillard’s reading, escapes containment in the mode of temporality which Deleuze and Guattari call *chronos*, which creates distinctions between subjects and objects, beginnings and endings. But the object makes its escape without being reduced to a figure for unhistorical *forgetting*. Instead, the fetish’s materiality, I suggest, renders it an historical trace within that alternative temporal mode, *aeon*, in which events become

bound through rhizomatic or multilinear assemblages. Only here can the fetish's material constitution as a form binding together heterogeneous events and worlds be recognized. As an index of multiple worlds, the fetish as fatal object can be taken as representative of what Thomas Pavel calls a "weak fusion" between sacred and profane worlds. Where, in a "strong" fusion, the alternate or sacred world matches the profane one point for point, in a weak fusion "the two levels make contact with one another only selectively" (140). The fetish object, according to this model, would become a kind of "world" in itself--the sole point at which, for the fetishist, existence of alternate historical or ontological realities would be experienced.²

Viewed in sum, the poststructuralist reworking of fetishism represented by the contributions of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and Baudrillard shows clearly the threat posed by the fetish to traditional teleological, epistemological, and psychoanalytic assumptions. It also suggests some of the specifically *narrative* implications of fetishism's historical revenge. Derrida's emphasis on a heterogeneity of historical descriptions, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizomatic historical assemblages, and Baudrillard's theorizing about destiny all point to distinctive features of an ontological dominant in fetish theory. If narratives privileging linearity, ontological continuity, and strict distinctions between imagination and reality can be taken as epistemologically-oriented where the fetish is concerned, then perhaps narratives which emphasize repetition, plurality, heterogeneity, and the breakdown of stable distinctions between the real and the imaginary might be indicative of an ontological dominant. Yet on the basis of these theories alone, it is impossible to determine, finally, the relationship between the

epistemological disruptions which they describe, and an absorbed perspective on the fetish. This is because neither Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, nor Baudrillard are concerned with offering an explicitly affirmative model of fetishism. It is this difference that separates the poststructuralist from the postmodernist trend in fetish discourse, and it is for this reason that I turn now toward explicitly affirmative revisions of fetish theory. In doing so, part of my aim is to assess how contemporary efforts to de-stigmatize the fetishist's relation to objects and to history *within* the postmodern condition can be seen to harmonize with the specific ontological focus on the fetish emphasized by poststructuralist accounts. I also intend to ascertain, given postmodernism's cultural "lack of historicity," and its recognized turn from temporal to more spatial forms of representation, how or if contemporary revisions of fetish theory have offered new narrative models for understanding absorbed perspectives on fetishism as a historical practice.

Postmodern Fetishes: Jameson, Miklitsch, Pels, McCallum

I begin my analysis of fetishism and its relationship to postmodernism with Jameson for several reasons. First, the enormous impact of his article, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in 1983, followed by the full length book of the same title some eight years later, assure a familiar starting point from which to venture into some comparatively unfamiliar territory. Second, Jameson's text provides a bridge between the poststructuralist (particularly Baudrillardian) analysis of commodification, and the defining aspects of postmodernity as a specifically *historical*,

rather than aesthetic or theoretical, concept. As Douglas Kellner has observed, Jameson's description of postmodernism, and especially his political program for undermining it, embodies a kind of provisional "fatal strategy" (37). Third, and most important, Jameson's definition of the postmodern depends in part on a distinction between Van Gogh and Warhol that has important implications for fetishism as a historical discourse, and as a discourse *about* history. Jameson's argument that the objects of Warhol's art are fetishes which subvert or deny a hermeneutical approach is an important turning point in the evolution of fetish discourse, and its relationship to both postmodernity and history.

To understand why Jameson's use of fetish theory is so important requires a return to the context of his argument. Jameson opens his essay with a comparison between Van Gogh's "Peasant Shoes" and Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes." The aim is to establish a difference between the interpretive options open to the viewer of modernist and postmodernist visual art, when the apparent objects portrayed (in this case, shoes) are the same or nearly the same. Jameson argues that Van Gogh's painted boots allow for, and even encourage, a historical interpretive approach that is thwarted by Warhol's photographed pumps. This fundamental difference then becomes a platform on which Jameson erects additional features of postmodernist art and lived experience: flatness, superficiality, the "waning of affect," and the lack of historicity itself.

Summarized at such low resolution, Jameson's line of reasoning could be read as one which takes the similarity of content between Van Gogh and Warhol (shoes) as a means of presupposing differences of *form*. Yet on closer examination, it becomes evident that the argument is in fact concerned with how to negotiate any distinction at all

between form and content, given the present historical perspective from which they are viewed. Jameson's focus on similarity of content is inevitably bound up with what he describes as the rapidly eroding formal distinctions between these works, as a result of their circulation and reproduction within the postmodern. For this reason, he sets as the condition for a formal distinction one's interpretive ability to see *beyond* the fact that, in contemporary culture, Van Gogh's painting has been "copiously reproduced" to the point that it now appears, or threatens to appear, as "sheer decoration" (7). In order to save Van Gogh from the clutches of the postmodern, it is necessary to "reconstruct some initial situation out of which the finished work emerges" (7)--a mental restoration of a moment "which has vanished into the past" (7). Rather than beginning with a presumed difference of form distinguishing Van Gogh from Warhol, then, we have two works similar in content *and* form; what will determine the difference between them is their amenability to an interpretive approach that will reveal the history of their production. That this distinction is politically charged in Jameson is evident. Terms like "sheer decoration," "inert object," and "reified end product" are the degraded, anti-historical terms against which "symbolic act" and "production" are contrasted and validated.

Jameson offers two readings designed to liberate or reconstruct the lost history of Van Gogh's painting. The first focuses on the production of the work itself, through attention to the "initial content"--"agricultural misery" and "stark rural poverty" (7)--which it grasps or appropriates. The second interpretation is a Heideggerian emphasis on the emergence of the art object in a space between the material and the historical, where the latter alone involves the conferral of meaning (7). In this reading, the peasant shoes,

divorced from their lived context by the painting, are nonetheless able to recreate that “whole missing object world” (8) from which they have been appropriated. Yet the differences between these readings are less important, for Jameson, than the fact that they both confirm the value of a hermeneutical approach: “At any rate, both readings may be described as *hermeneutical*, in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth” (8).

Having established the viability of this hermeneutical approach in relation to a celebrated high modernist work, Jameson then turns his attention to Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes.” From the outset, Jameson describes this work as no longer capable of speaking to the viewer with the same degree of immediacy as the “Peasant Shoes.” But the real import of Jameson’s analysis, for my purposes, rests with the relationship it establishes between the blockage of hermeneutical interpretation and the fetish:

Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer, who confronts it at the turning of a museum corridor or gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object. On the level of the content, we have to do with what are now far more clearly fetishes, in both the Freudian and Marxian senses [. . .]. (8)

The identification of Warhol’s shoes as fetishes provides an important point of contrast between “Diamond Dust Shoes” and Van Gogh’s painting, which Jameson develops in a brief aside. Referring to an unidentified essay by Derrida, in which the Van Gogh boots are labelled as a heterosexual pair, admitting of no possible fetishization, Jameson establishes an essential distinction between Warhol and Van Gogh: Warhol’s work prevents the hermeneutic gesture to which Van Gogh’s painting willingly submits.

Foreclosing any attempt to recreate the lived world of its production, “Diamond Dust Shoes” is thus condemned to the status of “sheer decoration” from which “Peasant Shoes” was able to escape. And this, for Jameson, poses serious questions about the political potential of postmodern art:

Indeed, one is tempted to raise here--far too prematurely--one of the central issues about postmodernism itself and its possible political dimensions: Andy Warhol’s work in fact turns centrally around commodification, and the great billboard images of the Coca-Cola bottle or the Campbell’s soup can, which explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital, *ought* to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, then one would surely want to know why, and one would want to begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital. (9)

What interests me about Jameson’s argument is the way in which it implicates two different approaches to the fetish object, and fetish discourse, in the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. While Jameson has portrayed Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism as antiquated to the point of inapplicability to the postmodern scene,³ his easy identification of Warhol’s shoes as Marxian *and* Freudian fetishes should not be overlooked as itself an indicator of what I am calling a turn toward an ontological focus on the fetish object. For what is crucial in Jameson’s account is his conclusion that the inability to recreate the origins of Warhol’s work betokens much more than a simple modification of the content of postmodernist works in relation to those of modernism (a move signified, in the flow of Jameson’s argument, by the switch from “objects” to “fetishes”). In addition, and more importantly, the collapse of hermeneutic interpretation betrays a “fundamental mutation both in the object world itself [. . .] and in the disposition of the subject” (9). This mutation has the effect of breaking down the very

content/form divide by which modernist art can be identified. Indeed, Jameson's description of Warhol's work as an "inexplicable natural object" is strongly reminiscent of the opening of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism, which both instills and then condemns belief in the naturalness of the commodity. In light of that theory, we are justified in wondering whether the apparently offhand equation of Freudian and Marxian fetishes in Jameson's description of Warhol's work does not prove *necessary*, on some level, to his definition of the postmodern.

To try and answer this question requires speculating on the analytical significance of labelling Warhol's shoes both Marxian and Freudian fetishes. Here we can gain some useful insight, once again, from Slavoj Žižek, who offers a provocative argument about the importance of the "symptom" in Marx and Lacan. Žižek distinguishes between psychoanalytic and commodity fetishism on the basis of the ideological structures they conceal: "[I]n Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack ('castration') around which the symbolic network is articulated" (*Sublime Object* 49). For Žižek, this distinction also corresponds to the essential difference between the Marxist and Lacanian perspectives on ideology, the former designating a "*partial* gaze overlooking the *totality* of social relations," while the latter denotes "*a totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility*" (49, emphasis his). From these opposing perspectives, Marxist and Lacanian criticisms of ideology operate at odds with one another. Where ideological procedure in Marxist terms is "*false' eternalization and/or universalization*," in which specific historical configurations are made to appear as human universals (49-50), the Lacanian designation

of ideology consists in “the very opposite of eternalization: an *over-rapid historicization*” (50). The Lacanian perspective treats efforts to historicize a construction like the family triangle as an effort to elude the constant *return* of castration and the Real of the Law through various historical manifestations. It is this perspective which Žižek himself endorses, and which leads him to the conclusion that Marx “did not succeed in taking into account [. . .] the leftover of the Real eluding symbolization” (50).

But to introduce Žižek here or elsewhere is not intended as an endorsement of his Lacanian perspective on ideology. Such a perspective privileges the psychoanalytic model of fetishism over that of Marx for purposes of ideological critique, which is not my aim. Instead, Žižek’s distinction is valuable because it shows how the two models can be read as contradictory analytical structures. That is, as long as they are placed in a moralizing framework which constrains the fetish to a material embodiment of ideology, Marxist and Freudian theory are in fact incompatible on the subject of fetishism. The former posits a material object in which a supposedly universal quality (exchange-value) is affirmed at the expense of the positivistic historical configuration which enables it (the development of the capitalist mode of production). In Freud, a material object born out of a chance historical configuration (its placement as the last thing seen before the sight of the female genitals) disavows the universal lack on which desire depends.⁴ To call an object a Marxian *and* Freudian fetish is therefore, following this logic, a fundamental confusion of paradigms, which would lead one to conclude that the fetish is guilty of both over-rapid universalization *and* historicization. In the context of ideological critique, such a contradictory conclusion might be taken to suggest both the “end” of ideology and

its complete hegemony.

Yet this is, in fact, precisely the state of Jameson's postmodernism, as related in the conclusion of his book:

[I]deology is now over, not because class struggle has ended and no one has anything class-ideological to fight about, but rather because the fate of "ideology" in this particular sense can be understood to mean that conscious ideologies and political opinions, particular thought systems along with the official philosophical ones which laid claim to a greater universality--the whole realm of consciousness, argument, and the very appearance of persuasion itself (or of reasoned dissent)--has ceased to be functional in perpetuating and reproducing the system. (398)

This bears further traces of Baudrillard and his statement, *pace* Foucault, that no one is any longer the subject of power, knowledge, or history (*Fatal* 113). Yet if we consider Jameson's broader conclusions regarding the subject and history within the culture of late capitalism, and if we accept Žižek's definition of the symptom as "a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus" (*Sublime* 21), then Jameson's critical reading of the Warhol shoes serves as an important symptom within his own theory of postmodernism as a post-ideological state. In Jameson, we find postmodernism defined through a theoretical breakdown which occurs somewhere outside its own historical field (at the point where the still-relevant, and prototypically modernist, Freudian and Marxian theories of fetishism meet and nullify one another) and which yet serves as its enabling condition. Within postmodernity, according to Jameson, history itself becomes increasingly idealized the further it recedes from individual experience, since the postmodern subject can know only "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (27). Postmodernism is thus defined as historically continuous with modernism through the vehicle of the fetish, but in such a way that linear

continuity cannot be known except from a position *outside* the historical present. The result is the paradoxical concept of postmodernism as a historical “break” with modernism that nonetheless proceeds from it.

Moreover, Jameson’s fusion of paradigms can also be taken, I submit, as a transitional moment between what Pietz calls the fourth stage in the evolution of fetish discourse, and a new fifth or postmodern stage. Labelling the Warhol shoes as Freudian *and* Marxian fetishes is in keeping with the earlier twentieth century tendency to mix disciplinary constructions of the fetish; but it also reveals the dead end of that approach as a means of gaining critical distance on contemporary culture. Jameson’s argument enacts a subtle performative reversal of the hierarchy established by Marx and Freud, whereby the rational, theoretical approach to fetishism is valorized at the expense of its superstitious practice. For Marx, the practice of fetishism was steeped in illusion and a belief in false magic that obscured history, while the theory of commodity fetishism gave insight into historical progress. But in Jameson’s postmodernism, where “exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced” (18), it is now the theoretical effort to gain historical perspective that takes on the aspect of a mystical endeavour. Jameson’s symptomatic reading of Warhol’s shoes locates the fetish’s magic in the ability it grants to the *theorist* to project himself into a past which is no longer accessible in any other way. What was once an object demonized for the false faith it instilled at the expense of historical awareness, has become the last object in which to place faith in the continuity of our present experience with the lost past of modernity. For Jameson, history is no longer even theoretically knowable without

reference to those magical objects which served, in the context of modernity, as the sites of its disappearance.

Thus even as it expires, the distanced or epistemological approach to fetishism paves the way for a shift toward the absorbed perspective which it historically rejects. Jameson calls attention to this shift twice in the conclusion of his book. Elaborating on his thesis about the “mutating object world” of the postmodern, he appears prescient of later approaches to the fetish object: “[T]he ‘things’ in question have themselves changed beyond recognition, to the point where one might well find people arguing for the desirability of the thinglike in our amorphous day and age” (314). And later, echoing Adorno, Jameson contemplates “whether *practices* have not replaced ratiocination” (398, emphasis added). Of course these possibilities are attended by Jameson’s undisguised disapproval; indeed, it is his disapproval which confines his own use of fetish discourse to the status of a symptom. Nevertheless it is along the affirmative path anticipated by Jameson that recent efforts to recuperate the *practice* of fetishism (whether sexual or commodity-based) have been conducted. The rise of a particular branch of postmodern thinking about fetishism takes up where Jameson’s combination of Freudian and Marxian fetishes leaves off. It takes up, that is, with an effort to move beyond the impasse which a theoretical privileging of the distanced perspective on fetishism generates, and to follow through on the historical “promise” of the fetish at which Jameson’s account only hints.

One recent attempt to theorize a more absorbed perspective on fetishism is Robert Miklitsch’s *From Hegel to Madonna: Towards a General Economy of “Commodity Fetishism.”* Miklitsch engages directly with Jameson’s reading of Warhol, and argues

that condemning Warhol's work for its failure to engender political commentary is an act of "aesthetic bad faith" (70) which substitutes polemics for analysis. Yet there is still evidence of hope in Jameson's account, for according to Miklitsch, Jameson's own act of reading deconstructs the political conclusions he draws, implying the need for renewed *emphasis* on the dialecticality of commodity fetishism that is supposedly defused by Warhol's work. To remain viable in the postmodern historical context, however, this emphasis must shift the focus away from "reification and 'false consciousness'" toward "pleasure and desire, consumption and commodification" (72). Only then will an updated model of commodity fetishism be able to contend with the pleasures specific to the contemporary commodity as a "social hieroglyph" (78).

It is important to note, however, that Miklitsch does not endorse a simple turn toward affirmation or consumption alone. Commenting on the recent theoretical "fetishization of fetishism" (25), he takes pains to distance himself from what he sees as a widespread movement, in cultural studies, which treats affirmation as a simple shift from production to consumption, or from class to identity politics (28). Instead, Miklitsch argues that what is needed in the context of historical postmodernism is a more thoroughly dialectical theory of commodity fetishism than has existed before-- one that is *both* negative and affirmative (21). Between the persistent negativity of Marxist thinkers such as Jameson and Eagleton, and the at times riotous affirmation of Deleuze and Guattari (56), Miklitsch calls for an analysis of the "commodity-body-sign" as an effort to "think the unthought of classical Marxism: an alternative, *critical*-affirmative conception of commodification" (78).

The success of Miklitsch's project rests, therefore, on its ability to place in a kind of theoretical suspension those negative-dialectical approaches to postmodern commodification, and more consumption-oriented models like that of Arjun Appadurai, who argues that the "political logic of consumption" demands attention to the temporal life of objects beyond their *production* as commodities designed for market exchange.⁵ Miklitsch's solvent for this suspension is his unique reading of Baudrillard's political economy of the sign. Like Baudrillard, Miklitsch argues that the classical Marxist conception of commodity fetishism, which allies the notion of use-value to the body and its needs, is outdated in contemporary Western culture. This is because, according to Miklitsch, the body is now "always already *mediated* by the commodity or, more precisely, the commodity-sign economy" (15). But updating Marx with a view toward contemporary cultural analysis cannot rest with Baudrillard's anti-naturalistic critique of political economy, which effectively eradicates the idea of need or use-value and thereby "courts the charge of *genetic* idealism" (90). Instead, Miklitsch proposes a historicization of Baudrillard's generalized fetishism of the code as itself the distinctive late capitalist "moment" of postmodernity.⁶ Such a move facilitates attention to a crucial element absent from Baudrillard's model: the production of the sign itself (91).

The "perverse," anti-Baudrillardian reinsertion of sign-production within the restricted political economy of commodity fetishism is the main tactic by which Miklitsch's critical-affirmative approach is able to account for the historical production of the contradictions between use-value and value as such, or between exchange-value and sign-value in Baudrillard's model (91). Attention to this process preserves a focus on the

“point” of production as the origin of use-, exchange-, and sign-value, (the moment of exploitation itself), while also emphasizing the crucial “epistemological stake” (91) in retaining the concept of use-value. Where, in Baudrillard, use-value is reduced to a formal “shadow” of exchange-value, Miklitsch maintains use-value’s significance as “itself a figure for need (*besoin*) or, more generally, that bio-material referent which is the real” (91). In the postmodern context, however, the real does not exist as a natural or original substance *prior to* production (as the term “commodity-body-sign” already suggests), but is instead fully subsumed in a constant and reversible “loop of desire” (170, n. 78) with *final* consumption, the sphere of Baudrillard’s symbolic exchange. The consequence is that the real which use-value guarantees by its reinsertion in a general political economy is one whose movement as a “history of rationalization” (91) is always contaminated by desire, and hence amenable to non-unilinear cycles of circulation between needs, production, and consumption.

This reversible movement, from needs to consumption and vice versa, has important implications for an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a historical narrative. Miklitsch’s theoretical strategy for “remembering” the point of production in a general political economy where need and desire have become indistinguishable takes a crucial step toward enabling what John Frow calls a reversible or “textual” model of cultural memory, to which I alluded in Chapter One. Like Miklitsch, Frow takes issue with Jameson’s mournful description of “lost history” as a defining feature of the postmodern. He places Jameson’s distinction between anti-historical (postmodernist) pop images, and more historical (modernist) works of art, within a now defunct Durkheimian framework

of personal vs. collective memory. This framework, even in its most advanced formulations, continues to associate personal memory with absolute presence or temporal continuity, and collective memory with material mediation and degraded archives of the past, emphasizing a traditional logic of *retrieval* that is simply outdated (222-23). As an alternative, Frow offers a model of memory as *writing* which “avoids the nostalgic essentialism that affirms the reality of an origin by proclaiming its loss” (225). As I suggested earlier, Frow’s model fits well with a theory of fetishism as historical narrative because it acknowledges the role of both forgetting and desire in structuring history. And Miklitsch’s general economy, which locates the classical model of commodity fetishism within a reversible circulation of desire, would appear to enable a theory of fetishism capable of generating historical narratives in which, as Frow suggests, historical truth is subsumed “*within*, not outside or in opposition to, the phantasmatic economy of (personal or collective) desire” (230).

But Miklitsch does not develop these implications for historical theory, confining his focus to commodity fetishism’s attack on the “real” of the body alone. This is not surprising, given his acknowledged focus on the commodity-body-sign. What *is* surprising is that traditional accounts of the body/fetish divide (including their privileged point of contact, the phallus/penis) emerge practically unscathed from this critical-affirmative re-modelling. Despite distinguishing his approach from traditional theories of fetishism on the basis of its attention to “specific commodities and sexualities, specific pleasures and (parts of) bodies” (73), there is very little concrete analysis or elaboration in Miklitsch’s book of the various “pleasures” to which the critical-affirmative approach is

supposed to give access. When Miklitsch actually discusses desires and part-objects, as in his reading of the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* album cover (72-78), the reader is left disappointed by the simple invocation of "manifold pleasures" (77) offered up by the Jagger-phallus-image. Although highly critical of an interpretation of the art-commodity that would equate penis with phallus, Miklitsch offers little indication of how his affirmative approach might dismantle this relationship, unless the obvious statement that "the role of the phallus [. . .] is a starring one" (76) serves, in itself, to deconstruct that privileged status. The result is that the "loop of desire" in which Miklitsch recontextualizes his restricted analysis of commodity fetishism appears to be one in which the centrality of the phallus is not only a contingent historical development, but, one suspects, a logical precondition, and therefore one to which "critical-affirmation" offers no alternative.

Of course, Miklitsch's reification of the phallus at the heart of his theoretical model is entirely in keeping with the psychoanalytic essentialism of the early Baudrillard on which he draws so heavily. But this essentialism compromises much of what Miklitsch portrays as the radical potential of his theoretical model, which is its capacity to focus on the *specific* fetish object, for the fetishist. By historicizing Baudrillard's critique of political economy as the distinctive "moment" of postmodern commodity fetishism, rather than attending to Baudrillard's later work, which offers its own treatment of the singular object in flight from the exchange circuit, Miklitsch significantly downplays the threat which an affirmative perspective on the fetish poses to Western theoretical conceptions of history or causality. While Miklitsch insists that "the problem of

affirmation cannot be divorced from [. . .] its historical conditions of possibility” (58), his model only hints at the specific historical and ontological implications of this turn toward an affirmative approach to fetishism. For an account more sensitive to the specifically postmodern, disruptive power of such a turn, I refer now to the work of Peter Pels.

In an article entitled “The Spirit of Matter: On Fetish, Rarity, Fact, and Fancy,” Peter Pels develops the concept of “untranscended materiality” as it emerges both in the historical evolution of fetish theory, and in discussions of what he calls the fetish’s more celebrated historical twin, the cabinet object or rarity. Strongly influenced by Pietz (recall that “untranscended materiality” is the first aspect of Pietz’s general theory), Pels’s article attempts to portray the fetish and rarity as, respectively, the degraded and celebrated “others” of the commodity during a time of burgeoning global trade. In this capacity, Pels’s interpretation of the seventeenth century discourse on rarities offers a complement to Pietz’s historical genealogy of fetish discourse. Yet, for the purposes of this study, what interests me most about Pels’s work is the lengthy introduction to his historical account, which locates the threat of fetishism in its ability to overpower and influence the subject *through* its materiality. Although Pels does not refer to Baudrillard directly, his remarks on the material otherness of the fetish in relation to dominant hierarchies of Western thought place the most radical aspects of Baudrillard’s fatal object within recent debates about materiality, epistemology, and consumer practice.

Like Miklitsch, Pels looks to Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things* for the seeds of an alternative approach to the problem of fetishism. In particular, Pels builds upon what Appadurai calls “methodological fetishism.” According to Appadurai,

methodological fetishism is an inevitable procedural anomaly of social analysis, describing the fact that the meaning of objects can only be read *after* they have been placed into motion by human intention. This analytical practice is anomalous because it runs counter to the theoretical assumption underlying it, which is that all things have meaning only because first *given* that meaning by human beings (5). Reading this “methodological fetishism” as an inversion of the typical approach to social analysis, whereby “theory provides hypotheses that method translates into research practice” (93), Pels finds in Appadurai’s statement of method a radical invitation to subvert the philosophical “constructionist” assumption that the material elements of social life serve as “blank slates” on which human intention is written (94). Against the traditional logic that defines meaning as that which is attributed by human subjects to material objects,⁷ Pels finds in “methodological fetishism” a strategy for acknowledging the fetish’s materiality as a threat to meaning (95).

In Pels’s view, then, the value of Appadurai’s approach is that it refuses to treat the fetish as the mere embodiment of false value--a refusal that enables a partial shift away from the primacy of theory over methodological “practice” in the analysis of fetish objects. But according to Pels, Appadurai’s focus on commodity fetishism prevents him from doing justice to the fetish’s unique and threatening power, which resides *in* its materiality:

By concentrating on the commodity phase, commodity candidacy or commodity context of the thing, Appadurai highlights its systematic social life, its transcendence by a system of human exchange values, while downplaying the way in which fetishism insists that the fetish is an object that has the quality to singularize itself and disrupt the circulation and commensurability of a system of human values. This capacity to

singularize itself in relation to an ongoing process, and thereby to arrest it, is what makes the fetish into an “other thing.” It is “other” in relation to accepted processes of defining the thing by its use and exchange value [. . .]. However, its singularity is not the result of sentimental, historical or otherwise personalized value: The fetish presents a *generic* singularity, a unique or anomalous quality that sets it apart from *both* the everyday use and exchange *and* the individualization or personalization of objects. (98)

It is this lack of both use and exchange value--the appearance of a kind of “void” in the system of commodity exchange, strongly recalling Baudrillard’s fatal object--that forces the fetish’s materiality to stand out. In Pels’s opinion, to continue to read the fetish in relation to that system of exchange, as does Appadurai, is to overlook the challenge which the fetish poses both to the system and the subject seeking to control it.

In order to understand that threat, it is necessary to focus on the “message” of the fetish’s materiality itself. This is no simple task, however, for as Pels states in the introduction to his essay, the otherness of the fetish which has for so long threatened and seduced Western philosophy “points to a theory of signification that cannot be thought from within an intellectual tradition that is still heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought” (92). Nevertheless, Pels clears the path for such a theory by exhorting us to stop thinking of materiality as a quality residing *in* things, since this assumption reinforces traditional ontological distinctions between subject and object, and grounds the philosophical hierarchization of ideal meaning and signification over materiality. Instead, Pels suggests that we view the material relationship between humans and things as an essentially *aesthetic* one, thereby registering how knowledge is mediated by the senses. Viewed from this perspective, fetishism demonstrates a profound challenge to the philosophical distinction between subject and object, or between “sensuous objects” and

“objects of sense”:

[Fetishism] points to an aesthetic sensibility in which the direction of mutual influence of human subject and thinglike object can be reversed; in which we cannot only think animistically, of anthropomorphized objects, of a spirit *in* matter, but also fetishistically, of human beings objectified by the spirit *of* the matters they encounter. The greed or fancy evoked by the fetish constitutes humans as sensuous, and therefore suffering, beings, as both subject and object of a historical configuration of desire in which neither humans nor objects possess a predetermined primacy. (101-02)

Ultimately, it is as an essential part of an “aesthetics of untranscended materiality” (102) that fetish discourse persists as a challenge to contemporary discourses of representation, collapsing distinctions between symbol and referent, or sign and signified, on which those discourses are based.

Unlike Miklitsch, however, Pels does not explicitly endorse an affirmative perspective on the practice of fetishism. Nevertheless, his discussion of the fetish as a “generic singularity” (98) strengthens the hypothesis, which I have advanced over the last two chapters, that an absorbed approach to the fetish casts it as an *ontological* substitute for its non-magical double. As a descriptive term, “generic singularity” expresses the fundamental confusion of form and content in which the fetish is always implicated, and enables us to see ontological substitution as itself the “invariant kernel” of the fetish. Refusing to treat the substitute as simply a false representation of what it replaces, the concept of generic singularity acknowledges what the fetishist always believes about the fetish, that it is “too powerful a presence to be a mere re-presentation of something else” (Pels 113). It also privileges the fetish’s materiality or “thing-status” over its function as a sign:

On the one hand, the fetish is a material presence that does not represent

but “takes one’s fancy,” making us suffer sensuously. On the other, it is only fanciful to us because it reminds us of a displacement and signals a loss or denial. Thus, the fetish shows the limits of representation by disrupting the continuity of reference and replacing it by a substitution (not a re-presentation but a presentation of something else). Yet at the same time it asks how we can know the substituted by the signals emitted from what substitutes for it: or how we can know the virtual if that can only be conveyed through the material itself. (114)

The aesthetic approach suggested by Pels enables us to see the fetish not as a representation of some lost phantasmatic object--an object whose “virtual” status preserves a fiction of the real--but instead, as a material presence substituting for a lost real object whose absence relegates the real itself to the status of the virtual.

Furthermore, if we return to Blais’s “multiple worlds” thesis, in which alternative times can be hypothesized on the basis of a subject’s *purposive* relationship with objects, Pels enables us to consider that the unique power of the fetish as a historical trace may stem from the subject’s belief that the fetish has a purpose *for him or her*. While a multiple worlds thesis can always be maintained through a shift of ontological emphasis on generic objects (as Blais points out), the ontological uniqueness of the fetish--or its status as *generically* unique--is especially conducive to this relativist outlook, because of the epistemological reversal which the fetish *forces* on the fetishist. In this event, we can interpret Berkeley Kaite’s observation that the fetish is “not an object but a relation” (29), as evidence that the fetish is materially powerful because it redefines objects *as* relations. The fetish contaminates the generic materiality of the object-world with relational gaps that are *ontological*, rather than merely epistemological, in nature.

Of course, by insisting on a contextualization of his aesthetic within the historical discourse of rarities, Pels can be accused of failing to emphasize, like Pietz, the threat of

untranscended materiality to received models of history. But Pels is more attentive than Pietz to the disparity between the specific cultural-historical aesthetics in which the ideas of the fetish and the rarity took shape, and that in which they are subsequently retold in narrative form. By showing the influence of fetishes and rarities on the evolution of the word “fact” within the English language, Pels implicates the history he reconstructs in the Enlightenment project to ban the threat of “wonder” which fetish-facts were said to instill (109-10). That project emerged in the seventeenth century as an “epistemology of classification” attending the then-dominant mercantile aesthetic which attributed the fascination of *unclassifiable* objects (such as fetishes and rarities) to their absolute, non-narrative, or non-contextual significance.⁸ The aim of this new classificatory logic was to systematize and rationalize the idea of a “fact” apart from interpretation, which it accomplished by borrowing the notion of non-narrative meaning from the fetish and the rarity, while rejecting the corresponding awe that such objects occasioned. The result was that the wondrous singularity, like the fetish, became demonized as a thing “insufficiently controlled by subjective discipline” (110), while the rational, categorizable fact became the basis of Western philosophy and science, “a datum of experience separate from the conclusions we may base upon it” (108-09). In this light, the very distinction between history and fiction, depending as it does on an appeal to facts somehow beyond the reach of narrative, owes something to this polarization of two aesthetics intending, on the one hand, to instil wonder and belief in strange objects, and, on the other, to provide explanation and instruction.

While Pels tells his historical narrative in a manner that emphasizes traditional

factuality, his theoretical speculations enable one to imagine a narrative based on an alternative aesthetic, in which historical authenticity is derived from those aspects of singularity and non-narrative meaning excluded by the Western fact in the process of defining itself. Such an aesthetic would attribute the constructive historical power of the fetish to its generic singularity, its wondrous materiality. The spirit of matter which, according to Pels, is most seductive in times of rapid economic change (112) is certainly as captivating within postmodernity as it was during the birth of the fetish itself.⁹ But if this aesthetic is to achieve its historical narrative potential, it will need to engage a perspective sympathetic to the fetishist's belief in the fetish object. It must therefore manifest a willingness to question factuality, epistemology, and the primacy of human intention as the privileged basis of the historical, and acknowledge wonder, materiality and descriptive ontology as alternative bases for historical narratives. In trying to theorize this transition, one is well advised by the work of E. L. McCallum. Like Pels, McCallum portrays the fetish as a direct challenge to traditional philosophical constructions of subjectivity, objectivity, and difference.

The most detailed attempt to construct an affirmative, postmodern model of fetishism to date is E. L. McCallum's *Object Lessons: How to Do Things With Fetishism*. Confining herself to the psychoanalytic definition of the fetish, McCallum locates the ties between fetishism and postmodernism in their common concern with loss. Like several theorists of female fetishism, whose work she treats in detail, McCallum argues that the psychoanalytic definition of the fetish is rooted in loss rather than lack, and defends this interpretation through a close reading of Freud's 1927 essay. For McCallum, however,

fetishism's value extends beyond its use as a tool for disrupting binary models of sexual difference and gender identity: it also provides an epistemological strategy for negotiating the many losses (of meaning, center, or truth) in which postmodernism trades (xv). Describing the traditional theoretical disapproval of fetishism as "a charge against an interpretive approach that fixes meaning" (xv), McCallum proposes to make "a serious effort not just to think *about* fetishism, but more importantly to think *through* fetishism" (xv). Such a shift from a "masterful, distant epistemology" to a "more sympathetic epistemology" enables one to see, from the fetishist's point of view, what McCallum calls the "two faces of fetishism":

One is antithetical to language by dint of its investment in fixity and stasis. The other is an instrumental strategy for symbolic exchange, epistemology, and political imagination by virtue of its investment in ambivalence, particularly in the ambivalent tension desire sets up between belief and knowledge. Where the negative side has been too long emphasized in psychoanalytical interpretations of fetishism, this study prefers to draw upon the positive offerings, the insights fetishism holds as a strategy for understanding sexual differences and the connections between desire and knowledge. (4-5)

Clearly, McCallum's work promises much for an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a discourse about history. Yet as I want to suggest through a closer examination of her argument, the fact that McCallum insists on an *epistemological* reassessment of the fetishist's point of view--deprivileging, and at times even denying, the ontological orientation of that perspective--undermines her model's potential for reversing the specifically *historical* prejudices that have plagued the fetish. The tension that emerges at various points throughout McCallum's book between sympathizing with the fetishist, and maintaining an epistemological focus on the problem of fetishism, can

be read as evidence that the dividing line between distanced and absorbed perspectives on fetishism falls not only between affirmation and condemnation of the fetishist, but, at a deeper level, between epistemological and ontological approaches to the fetish object.

In fact, the incompatibility between an epistemological and a sympathetic treatment of the fetishist's perspective can be detected even in the introductory passage quoted above. Despite purporting to focus on the "positive offerings" of sexual fetishism, rather than its negative characterization, McCallum's model presents itself as disdainful of those aspects of fetishistic practice (the fixity of desire in a single object, the choice of object as an *unconscious* process, and the lack of interest in what the fetish stands for) with which a fetishist is most likely to identify. By splitting the fetishist's own perspective into "two faces"--one connoting fixity of object, and the other expressing process and knowledge--McCallum begins by demonstrating her allegiance to the historical privilege afforded to the *rational* perspective in fetish discourse. Indeed, this position is staked out explicitly in McCallum's explanation of the difference between thinking "through" and thinking "about" fetishism:

The change from thinking *about* fetishism to thinking *through* fetishism calls for a change in attention, from fetish objects to the use subjects make of fetishes and fetishism. Thus, this study is not a catalog of fetishes, for that would reinscribe us in the familiar problem--the very one fetishists are classically faulted for--of attending to the object rather than clearly confronting the issue at hand. Rather, the aim is to show how thinking as a fetishist leads us to a more complicated and nuanced view about sexual and ontological differences, and that through this complication, more creative and productive interpretations of subjects and objects can emerge. The end result is an epistemology of fetishism, its effects on the subject and on the constitution of the subject's view of the world. (xvi)

From the outset, McCallum's effort to think through fetishism is concerned with *avoiding*

the blame which accrues to the fetishist as a result of “attending to the object rather than clearly confronting the issue at hand” (xvi). But this formulation begs an obvious question: What, from the fetishist’s point of view, *is* the issue, if not the object? Placing the problem of fetishism in an epistemological framework, whether sympathetic or not, reveals immediately the necessity of inventing an issue for the fetishist *in addition to* the object itself. As we have seen in both Freud and Marx, that phantasmatic issue becomes the lever for abstracting an opposition between *form* and *content*, and for downplaying the fetish’s ontological challenge to the real/fantasy divide.

The impact of this epistemological framework on fetishism as a discourse about history becomes clearer, however, in McCallum’s reading of Freudian fetishism as a paradigm for breaking down binary models of sexual difference. The hinge of this argument is a close analysis of Freud’s use of the term *penis* to ground the notion of the fetish as a substitute, in the mind of the little boy, for what he perceives to be missing on the body of the mother. Identifying several discrepancies in Freud’s essay between the terms *penis* and *phallus*, and between *which* penis--that of the father, or that of the phallic mother--the fetish is intended to replace, McCallum argues that although Freud relies on a self-evident concept of the penis to ground his definition, his own theory problematizes the standard that it puts into play. Once the definition of a penis, or who may possess one, is questioned, fetishism escapes its limitations as a strategy by which men disavow female difference, problematizing the heterosexual divide between male and female. Furthermore, as an even more paradoxical result of uncertainty about the penis, the fetish comes to the fore as the more “self-evident” of the two objects: “We might be better

served to think of the penis as the substitute for the fetish rather than the other way around, since the fetish has a clearer delineation in this text, as the thing which provides reassurance and enables difference--sexual or ontological--to be negotiated" (23).

I shall return shortly to McCallum's invocation of ontological difference here. But at this point in her argument, McCallum seeks to further fortify her claim that the penis fails to serve as a prototype for the fetish by engaging the issue of *priority* in Freud's definition. Once again, as she demonstrates, the concept *penis* dissolves as a self-evident standard in both modes through which a prototype can operate. First, the penis contradicts the principle that a prototype must appear *before* its substitute by appearing *after* the fetish in Freud's account. As McCallum observes, the revelation of the (male) penis as fetish-prototype appears only after the substitute-fetish has been discussed as a replacement for the *mother's* "lost" penis (24-25). Second, this "real" penis fails in its role as an exemplar of the qualities typical of the thing it defines through its failure to distinguish itself on the basis of realness from the phantasmatic penis of the mother (25).¹⁰ The instability of the term *penis* enables the possibility that the mother's penis could serve as the fetish-prototype (26). Ultimately, according to McCallum, such a reading emphasizes *interpretation* over reality in Freud's essay:

What this reading of priority reveals is that existence in "Fetishism" is hardly based on realness; rather it is the force of interpretation that brings something into existence, that makes it matter whether it is real or imaginary. What counts is not whether something is real or not, but the effect it has. This emphasis strategically erodes the boundary between reality and fantasy, underscoring the important role of interpretation, for that is what puts things in an order and creates meaning. (26)

Attractive as I find this effort to deconstruct the difference between reality and fantasy from the fetishist's perspective, it is here that the tension between an epistemological and absorbed perspective on fetishism becomes evident. For what McCallum seems to be getting at here by shifting among terms such as "existence," "realness" and "imaginary" are ontological categories--categories which she argues are de-privileged by, and ultimately less important than, epistemological terms like "interpretation," "effect," and "meaning." But this emphasis on interpretation over realness, or epistemology over ontology, in fact *strengthens* the divide between reality and fantasy which McCallum's reading attempts to disrupt. This is because, by divorcing the fetish's unique meaning from any claim on what constitutes the real, the ontological dividing line between real and imaginary is removed (as we have seen many times by now) to that stage of pre-fetishistic looking at the *non-magical* or *non-fetishized* object. The fact that, despite her lengthy discussion of the logic of prototypes, McCallum never addresses the placement of the pre-fetish object in Freud's essay, implies its status as a necessary, and unexamined, placeholder of "realness" in her own analysis.

Not surprisingly, the reification of this difference between the real and the phantasmatic is revealed when McCallum turns to a discussion of *time*:

Freud himself indulges in a phantasmatic temporality in the unfolding of his theory of fetishism. Only reality is subject to the linear ordering of time, while fantasy allows a more fluid relation to time, enabling the subject to project forward (as Lacan's mirror-stage infant does) or backwards (as Freud's fetishist does) through time [. . .]. What this gradual transformation over the course of Freud's essay from any chance penis, to the mother's phallus, to the woman's penis elucidates is the mutability of temporality as well as sexuality (in the interrelated sense of gender distinctions and sexual activities) in fantasy life. (26)

If, as McCallum declares, the fetish enables the breakdown of distinctions between reality and fantasy, and if Freud's own narrative manifests a "fantasmatic temporality," why is the mutability of time confined to fantasy life? This sudden recourse to a notion of reality governed by linear historical progression marks the moment when the absorbed perspective on the fetish is abandoned for the sake of epistemological emphasis. This emphasis, as I have argued throughout the last few chapters, constrains the fetish to ontological sameness with the historical, non-magical object from the distanced perspective of the theorist. While McCallum clearly shows how the penis cannot serve as the prototype of the fetish on the basis of its "realness" compared to that of the mother's imaginary phallus, the ontological ramifications of this observation for the fetishist--that the fetish stands in for its non-magical double--is lost in the effort to privilege an epistemological reading of the fetish as signalling some *other* form of loss.

To liberate this ontological perspective would require attention to the one fetish prototype ignored by McCallum in Freud's essay: the pre-fetishized or non-magical object. This object satisfies both of McCallum's requirements for a successful prototype, in that it appears *before* the fetish and "exhibits all of the qualities typical of a thing" (25). Focus on this prototype would open up an absorbed reading of the fetish like that suggested at the end of Chapter Two, in which the fetish would stand for the loss of the real, non-magical object which enables its historical ordering power. This ontological approach, establishing as equally valid historical movements the two teleologies of Freud's argument, is certainly no more a strain to commonsense than McCallum's notion of interpretation *creating* its own objects. But it is, I believe, more faithful to the

fetishist's perspective than McCallum's effort to privilege epistemology. This is because the non-magical object is the only one truly lost to the fetishist in the course of Freud's essay; the penis, as McCallum points out, is finally returned to the reader through its definition as the fetish prototype.

Privileging this ontological perspective should not be taken as simply a "conservative" reading of fetishism in Freud's text--a reading McCallum wards off because it asserts the priority of the father's real penis over the mother's phantasmatic one (25). Rather, the very logic of McCallum's argument pushes one toward the radical ontological potentialities of the fetish. The belief that contaminates knowledge for the fetishist must, if it is to weaken the subject/object divide, make a distinction between the one object which instills this belief, and all the other objects not so magically endowed. Indeed, McCallum's crucial conclusion that the distinction between penis and phallus is enabled by the notion of the fetish, and not vice versa, implies that the ontological difference negotiated by the fetish is not between--or not *only* between--subject and object, but between the magical object and its non-magical, non-fetishized double. What a fetishized phallus stands for is the loss of the penis itself as a non-fetishized, uninteresting, and "self-evident" thing or object. If a penis or phallus is only one among a host of possible fetishes, and not, as McCallum argues, the standard of what a fetish must be, then the concept "fetish" retains as its "invariant kernel" only the notion of a magical thing substituting for its non-magical other--a substitution as valid for a fetishized to a non-fetishized shoe as for a phallus to a penis.

This is not to say that McCallum does not recognize the specific ontological

issues opened up in a move toward the fetishist's perspective. On the contrary, she appears to acknowledge these ontological consequences toward the end of her reading of Freud, when she remarks, "Fetishism might seem to be obsolete in this economy of phallic exchange, no longer necessary as a guard against loss, as a memorial to castration, or as a means of conservation" (31). Yet despite this acknowledgement, she consistently limits the ontological problematic of fetishism to a weakening of the barriers between subject and object (108). The fetish's ontological difference from other objects is consistently denied by McCallum: "An object becomes a fetish because it is special to the fetishist, and not because it offers objective qualities that make it clearly more valuable than other objects" (117). Configuring the problem in this way contains the ontological threat opened by the fetish to *within* the problem of epistemology, but it also necessitates a move *outside* the fetishist's perspective. Hence, in her reading of Freud, McCallum is ultimately forced to protect the fetish from "meaninglessness" by maintaining its continued importance as a guard against the "return of the penis." By reinstituting an essential relationship between the penis and the fetish, McCallum continues to legitimate fetishism as an epistemological strategy in relation to the heterosexual matrix she seeks to disrupt.

Yet the historical and narrative implications of this retreat from ontology can be seen even more clearly when McCallum discusses fetishism as an epistemological strategy outside the realm of identity politics, this time through a reading of Toni Morrison's celebrated novel, *Beloved*. McCallum uses Morrison's novel to establish an essential difference between fetishism and melancholia as psychological methods of coping

with loss, and of negotiating conflicting views on fantasy and reality. Drawing attention to a pair of crystal earrings owned by the novel's central character, a former African-American slave named Sethe, McCallum reads these objects as fetishes enabling the affirmation of "conflicting beliefs about social reality" (112). More specifically, because they were originally a gift from her white mistress, they enable Sethe to negotiate between two contradictory opinions: that white people are both evil and good. When she loses these earrings through the course of the narrative, however, Sethe is no longer able to believe anything but evil of the white people she encounters. The corresponding turn away from fetishism toward melancholy--a less satisfying negotiation of loss, in McCallum's reading--is then signified by Sethe's mournful fixation on her strange young boarder, Beloved. Imagining that Beloved is her lost daughter returned to her, Sethe soon begins to lose touch with reality altogether (119). For evidence of this, McCallum presents a scene in which Sethe attacks her present abolitionist landlord because she mistakes him for her former master, the brutal Schoolteacher. In McCallum's reading, the irrationality of this attack clearly recalls the central and most disturbing moment in the book, in which, rather than surrender her recently freed children to Schoolteacher, Sethe kills them instead. This reaction, read as a failure to acknowledge reality and history in the absence of the fetishized earrings, leads McCallum to pronounce in favour of fetishism over melancholia as an epistemological strategy for coping with loss.

My objections to this reading of Morrison's novel stem not from any desire to contest McCallum's affirmation of fetishism over melancholy. Rather, it is the fact that McCallum uses *Beloved* to illustrate fetishism's strong ties to reality and history that

disturbs me, for such a reading is forced to overlook the serious ontological and historical discrepancies which Morrison's novel presents to the reader. To point out only the most obvious of these, the reader is never able to say that *Beloved* is not, in fact, exactly what Sethe thinks she is: her lost daughter now returned in a new form. Is it then fair to distinguish between fetishism and melancholia on the basis that the latter does not enable Sethe to maintain a clear focus on either historical continuity or reality, in a text whose most arresting features are precisely the disruption of those categories? Reading *Beloved* as a novel about the central character's negotiation of her relationship to loss and history is certainly in keeping with an epistemological approach to fetishism; but it also enforces what Brian McHale has called a "modernist" reading of a text which certainly enables--if it does not in fact *encourage*--alternative, ontological, and perhaps more distinctly *postmodern* readings. I shall have much more to say about the characteristics of the postmodern novel, and their relation to an absorbed approach to fetishism, in Part Two of this study. Suffice it to say for now, however, that to appreciate the features of Morrison's novel that render it an example of postmodernist fiction, would necessitate giving up the ideas of subjective focalization, historical continuity, and singular reality that obtain in the typical modernist novel. To argue that Sethe "loses touch with reality" is to force on *Beloved* a radical homogenization of various ontological violations which the text strategically foregrounds.

Again, however, McCallum is not unaware of these ontological issues. Toward the end of her analysis, she distinguishes between Sethe's fetishism and that of the *reader*, acknowledging that Morrison's novel breaks down the subject-centered

epistemological drive on which her argument depends:

What the fetishistic model enables us to see is the strength of Morrison's novel in leaving the question of who Beloved really is open to different possible interpretations. That undecidability is one of the things that draws us into the novel, the epistemophilic drive to know who she is. But in trying to assess who she is [. . .] we find that this subject-centered epistemophilia necessarily breaks down. More important than "who is Beloved?" is the question of how Sethe and Paul and the others relate to her, what they learn from her, and what we learn from them. (127)

This observation points to an important question about McCallum's distinction between fetishism and melancholy: why is Beloved necessarily a *melancholic*, rather than a *fetishistic*, testament to loss? McCallum's argument, which emphasizes the need to rethink subject/object distinctions, is weakened if the dividing line between melancholy and fetishism comes down to traditional associations of melancholy with animate *subjects*, and fetishism with inanimate *objects*. Yet this distinction is supported by an epistemological reading which presupposes the impossibility that Beloved herself might be a fetish for both Sethe and the reader. Indeed, from an absorbed, ontological perspective, she is a perfect candidate for fetishization. Beloved is a figure whose historical return in Sethe's life is unexpected and without explanation--a "fatal" figure who upsets historical continuity and ontological distinctions, substituting and standing for her own lost "double." And it is through Beloved, as McCallum points out, that the reader's epistemophilic interest is reflected back upon itself, forcing one to recognize her undecidable ontological status within the novel. Certainly some of the most important relationships which the mystery of Beloved calls into question are those between individual perception and historical reality.

Yet McCallum's reading must retreat from these possibilities in order to preserve

an epistemological focus on the problem of fetishism. This is because, as McCallum points out, Western epistemology is founded on the radical split between subject and object, with the object subordinated to the subject's command (108). Consequently, although her approach makes a greater case for closing the gap between subject and object than any other theoretical treatment of fetishism, her emphasis can remain epistemological only so long as it does not fundamentally upset this hierarchy--so long as, in the end, the subject remains in control.¹¹ For to maintain, as McCallum does, that "there are no fetish objects, only fetish subjects who appropriate objects fetishistically" (107) is ultimately to preserve alliances with a conservative, distanced view of fetishism as a problem of the subject's *attribution* of value to otherwise generic ontological objects. For this reason, I must disagree with McCallum when she states that "ontological difference reinforces fetishism's classification as deviant" (151). As Foucault has taught us, it is distinguishing between *subjects* on the basis of their particular interest that has long been the method of understanding and pathologizing sexual deviance--a process in which fetishism has played a crucial role as the "model perversion" (*History* 154). This subject-oriented perspective, essential to the maintenance of a universal historical teleology of sexuality or economic development, cannot claim to speak for the fetishist, concerned as he or she is with the absorbing distinction between magical and non-magical, or fatal and banal, objects.

Yet McCallum's book remains tremendously valuable for demonstrating just how far it is possible for epistemology to go in the affirmation of the fetishist's perspective on difference and on history, and for showing how much distance remains between

sympathetic and absorbed approaches to the fetish. This is the most important object lesson of McCallum's book--that theory, no matter how sympathetic it attempts to be toward its object of analysis, must always open some critical distance between itself and that object,¹² just as history must always presuppose some relation to a truth of the past in order to distinguish itself from fiction. McCallum forces us to remember that what distinguishes between distanced and absorbed approaches to fetishism is what one's discourse chooses *not* to examine, as a precondition for what it does. In this regard, McCallum's use of *Beloved* to buttress her theoretical claims is of special interest because it points out the possibility that theory may not be the best discourse within which to elaborate sympathetic or absorbed models of fetishism. Although I cannot endorse McCallum's reading of fetishism in Morrison's novel, I believe her turn toward postmodernist fiction is itself symptomatic of the postmodern dissatisfaction with traditional fetish theory as a discourse *about* history. If the truth of fetishism has traditionally been constrained to unhistorical forgetting, then a postmodern affirmation of fetishism must attend to its potential as a historical practice. This, in turn, necessitates open-mindedness about which narrative forms are best capable of representing that practice.

From Theory to Fiction

The journey made over the last two chapters from an analysis of fetishism's historical origins in a particular narrative form, through the alternative epistemological and ontological dominants in fetish theory, and on into the most recent postmodernist

affirmations of fetishism, has been the result of an effort to rethink fetish discourse from the unhistorical perspective for which fetish *theory* has traditionally demonized fetishistic *practice*. Reading fetishism in this manner (from the *inside out*, so to speak) has encouraged us to think of the self-evidently true and historical as only more narrative *constructions*, often relying on the fetish as the other against which to naturalize themselves. This approach, while forcing us to reconsider the distinctions between magical and generic objects, fantasy and reality, and even remembering and forgetting, has also demonstrated that any narrative discourse organizes and defines itself as much by the gaps required for its own constitution, as by the way it attempts to conceal those gaps. For this reason, just as distanced approaches to the fetish depend on the very absorbed practice which they condemn for their authority and valorization, so too must the liberation of that absorbed perspective rely, in part, on its moralizing critique. The analysis that makes up the last two chapters, while calling into question the ability of narrative to fix, finally, the truth of either history or fetishism, has depended nonetheless on the fact that the truth of both fetishism and history is an essentially *narrative* one.

It is therefore no accident that Part One of this study began with a historical theory of fetishism's evolution in Western philosophy, and ends with an examination of fetishism in one of the most influential examples of postmodernist fiction. The analytical movement from history to fiction suggests that the truth of fetishism as a discourse about history depends, as I have suggested earlier, on the kinds of stories one tells about it. In this context, the fact that affirmative, ontologically-oriented models of fetishism are a definitively postmodern theoretical phenomenon is fitting. Postmodernism is understood

by many as a cultural turn toward privileging spatial over temporal modes of representation.¹³ Among theorists of postmodern spatiality, Edward Soja is not alone in treating the postmodern privileging of space over time, and difference over continuity, as an *ontological* turn. In describing the requirements for a postmodern planning theory, Soja writes:

First, a new planning theory must be built upon a [*sic*] epistemological openness and flexibility that are suspicious of any attempt to formalize a single, totalizing, way of knowing, no matter how progressive it may appear to be. Second, it must make this openness a means of understanding ambiguity, fragmentation, multiplicity, and difference, for these are the material social realities of the contemporary world. This means not only tolerating but encouraging what can be described as *the disordering of difference* (as opposed to the modernist search for order and stability). Such a disordering of difference shifts some needed attention away from epistemology to ontology, to a re-exploration of the very nature of being and becoming, not only with regard to time but also to space. The intent of this ontological restructuring is to redefine radical subjectivity and political consciousness as inherently spatial, rooted in the existential spatiality of human life. (“Planning” 245)

That the “ontological restructuring” encouraged by Soja may benefit from an appreciation of the unique formal properties of postmodernist *fiction* is suggested by another prominent theorist of postmodernism, David Harvey. Accepting McHale’s thesis that postmodernist fiction’s ontological dominant is formally mimetic of the fractured and colliding spaces of contemporary culture (*Postmodernist* 38), Harvey argues that this fiction figures the postmodern breakdown of the “Other” into a proliferation of “others” in racial, gendered, or economic terms (301). Likewise, as I shall attempt to prove in the chapters that follow, it is postmodernist fiction’s ontological dominant, and its insistent interrogation of the nature and structure of historical truth, that renders it especially helpful in reconstructing an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a historical practice.

In making the shift from theory to fiction, however, I do not mean to suggest that postmodern theories of fetishism have wholly failed in their goal of constructing an alternative, affirmative, or sympathetic account of fetishistic practices in the various registers which they address. Miklitsch, Pels, and McCallum offer detailed and convincing explanations of why fetish discourse must be readapted to suit the analytical needs of theorists within postmodern culture, and I shall return to their theories in the chapters to come. I do want to stress, however, that these theories have not as yet capitalized on the specifically historical potential of fetishism's revenge as I read it in the work of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, or Baudrillard. This failure may be a result of the fact that Miklitsch, Pels, and McCallum are ultimately more conservative in their understanding of the boundaries of theory itself than are these poststructuralist philosophers. Obviously, *Glas*, *Anti-Oedipus*, and *Fatal Strategies* are texts which set out to disrupt, both formally and philosophically, the distinctions between theory, history, and fiction in ways that the later texts analyzed in this chapter do not. Where fetishism is concerned, this observation is more than just a footnote. Part of theorizing fetishism's revenge on its history as a discourse should be devoted to interrogating that trend--originating with the earliest first-encounter theories--whereby the fetishist's own narrative of fetish-formation is incorporated within a distanced, interpretive framework. To construct an absorbed perspective on fetishism necessitates examining the way in which theory uses historical narratives to define distinctions between truth and falsity, or even history and fiction. And to realize its most radical potential, an absorbed perspective also necessitates, I believe, a reversal of the authoritative privilege usually

accorded theory and history *over* fiction, preferring, for its delineation, fictions which use history and theory for disruptive, subversive ends.

Moreover, to recapitulate a point made earlier, the shift from theory to fiction is not intended to deny the existence of real practising fetishists, or real fetish objects, in some sense outside the narratives that would define them. Indeed, one of the points I hope to have established over the course of these two chapters is that the most prominent efforts to acknowledge and explain fetishism as a real social or clinical practice have proceeded by bracketing and foreclosing consideration of that threatening aspect of the fetish which grounds its extra-narrative presence: its essential materiality. The shift toward fiction will not seek to subdue or reclaim this essential materiality; but it will seek, at least, to acknowledge it as the fundamental truth of the fetish from the fetishist's perspective. In this sense, no less paradoxically, it may prove that fiction ultimately addresses the reality of fetishes and fetishism outside narrative by showing how the historical *truth* of fetish discourse is, in part, its discursive production of such "realities" (and I use the plural here deliberately). If, as Butler argues, materiality is inseparable from the process of *materialization*, and is therefore always dependent on what is allowed to "matter" in any given discourse (32), then fiction may ultimately prove to be more in tune with the fetish's essential materiality than previous theories through its refusal to foreclose the fetish's ontological threat as a problem of signification.

In Part Two, I will turn toward postmodernist fiction as a discourse which deliberately privileges ontological over epistemological questions. Since the fetish, as Pels argues, can never be "domesticated" by a theory that would attempt to halt its

oscillating movement (102), it is appropriate to turn to a narrative form more willing to take pleasure in that movement. Postmodernist fiction, I shall argue, is such a form.

Notes

1. Derrida points out that Hegel's "concrete description of the Negro could muddle the schema a bit" (207)--a problem of which, Derrida argues, Hegel was well aware. The logical muddle hinted at here serves as a preface to the way in which Freud's case studies, presented as "concrete" narratives, will challenge his own definition of the fetish in Derrida's reading. Kofman disagrees that Derrida has in fact discovered anything about the relationship between the case studies and the theory that Freud had not already emphasized himself ("Ça Cloche 122).
2. Note also that this model need not be confined only to two-world structures: as Pavel points out, "A weak literal model may coexist with other weak literal versions or even with other fusions" (140). I shall develop further this idea of the fetish as a link between worlds, and as a world in itself, in Chapter Three.
3. Jameson writes: "Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process. The 'life-style' of the superstate therefore stands in relationship to Marx's 'fetishism' of commodities as the most advanced monotheisms to primitive animisms or the most rudimentary idol worship [. . .]" (*Postmodernism* x).
4. It must be borne in mind, however, that the opposition sketched out by Žižek holds only to the extent that the psychoanalytic theory of fetishism is read exclusively as a strategy for ideological critique. This reading necessarily simplifies the relationship between the psychoanalytic fetish and history, since it describes the fetish as merely *concealing* the symbolic lack around which desire circulates. As Freud points out, however, and as I have attempted to foreground in my own reading of Freudian fetishism, the fetish's disavowal of the lost maternal phallus also always *memorializes* it, thereby *deprivileging* the historical configuration out of which it arises. This is something which Žižek does not take into account (no doubt for strategic reasons), so it is worthwhile to qualify his reading by drawing attention to Mitchell's essential distinction between fetishism and ideology in Marx. For Mitchell, ideology and fetishism exist in a dialectical relationship with one another, where "ideology is the mental activity that projects and imprints itself on the material world of commodities, and commodities are in turn the imprinted material objects that imprint themselves on consciousness" (162). Arguably, this more complex relationship between ideology and fetishism is reflected in Žižek's discussion of "practical" and "theoretical" blindnesses at work in commodity fetishism (*Sublime* 19-21). At any rate, although I find Žižek's hard opposition between Marx and Freud too simplistic as a general characterization of the relationship between their theories of fetishism, I believe it does provide a valid conceptual framework within which to evaluate Jameson's reading of the Warhol shoes. Despite what might appear, at first, to be a fundamentally aesthetic concern with defining postmodernist art, the fact that Jameson uses fetish discourse primarily for the purpose of ideological critique is suggested by his statement that Warhol's soup cans, as commodity fetishes, "*ought* to be powerful and critical political statements."

5. Appadurai argues against the classical, Marxist conception of the commodity as “any thing intended for exchange” (9) because it tends to reify, in theory, the differences between barter, commodity exchange, and the exchange of gifts. Rather than “searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things,” Appadurai defines the commodity as an object which has entered into a “commodity situation” (13). This situation does not confine an object to commodity status for the duration of its social life, but rather expresses the possibility of an object’s entering into, and leaving, the commodity state as a result of shifting social and temporal contexts. For Miklitsch, this “resolutely temporal approach” is important because it accounts for what he calls the process of *de*-commodification, and makes possible a new understanding of how value circulates through various competing types of exchange (88). Yet in Appadurai, this temporal dimension is emphasized at the expense of recognizing the fetish’s *ontological* threat to those systems of meaning and exchange in which it circulates--a point suggested in his turn away from the “magic” of the commodity. As we shall see below, Pels develops the consequences of this shift in his own reading of Appadurai. That Miklitsch does not address this reduction of fetishism’s magical power in Appadurai’s model is very much in keeping with what I shall soon portray as the too-comfortable fit he establishes between the fetish and the circulation of meaning through the sign.

6. Miklitsch here echoes Jameson and Huyssen, with whom he engages extensively, in conceiving of the postmodern as a “different order” (80) from earlier stages of capitalism. It should be noted that his isolation of sign-value within Baudrillard’s theory as the ground of this new historical stage is thus doubly anti-Baudrillardian, since Baudrillard has consistently resisted the characterization of his work as postmodern. For more on Baudrillard’s resistance to appropriation by theorists of postmodernism, see Gane, “Introduction” ix.

7. In the context of fetish theory, this acknowledgement necessarily portrays meaning as the human transcendence of the fetish’s essential materiality. As Pels observes, “Defining human traffic as the transcendence of materiality and contingency theoretically outlaws the fetish before it has been given a chance to unfold its otherness” (95).

8. According to Pels, early curiosity cabinets (those dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) were prevalent examples of a non-narrative presentation of singular objects. Though loosely characterized as “wonders,” the objects in such cabinets--which could range from exotic antiquities to preternatural items like unicorn (narwhal whale) horns--were deliberately selected so as to thwart taxonomical efforts. This suggests, to Pels, that although the curiosity cabinet is often portrayed as the ancestor of the modern museum, its earliest forms were in fact philosophically opposed to the museological approach to representation. Where museums collect objects on the basis of their ability to “stand for” something else, offering coherent representations of history or nationality, the objects in the curiosity cabinet were “only *sometimes* a sign or representation of something else.” Dominated by no single narrative that might connect them, the collective effect of these objects could just as easily be magical, artistic,

classical, or scientific (103-09).

9. Pels sees the theoretical resurgence of interest in fetishism and consumption as a result of “global developments that have given market ideology a new lease on life” (112).

10. McCallum calls special attention to the final line of Freud’s essay, in which the clitoris is explicitly identified as the “prototype of inferior organs,” a “real small penis” (“Fetishism” 157).

11. Despite McCallum’s stand on fetishism as a practice which breaks down the subject/object binary, her epistemological emphasis places her in the position of having to consider a number of anomalies that arise as the by-product of her theorizing, and which re-assert the primacy of the subject. Most symptomatic, perhaps, is McCallum’s openness to the possibility of one consciously *choosing* one’s fetish object, and choosing to become a fetishist in the first place (134). As a counterpoint to this possibility, McCallum also maintains that “an expanded notion of the fetish must be open to the possibility of an unconscious fetish object—things we do not consciously realize we need or insist on having” (133). These possibilities, which McCallum acknowledges are “oxymorons” in the context of fetish theory, are not treated in great detail, but I would argue that they demonstrate the untenable lengths to which one must go to preserve a “sympathetic” epistemological emphasis on fetishism.

12. This potential truism is worth emphasizing in the context of postmodern theory, which, according to Christopher Norris, often forgets its own dependence on some minimal critical distance in its effort to align itself with “first-order” narratives. As Norris writes: “Theory presupposes a critical distance between its own categories and those of a naturalized mythology or commonsense system of assumptions. Simply to collapse that distance [. . .] is to argue away the very grounds of rational critique” (23). Though Norris is here exaggerating the extent to which most theorists (he targets Lyotard in particular) actually seek to “collapse” the distance separating theory and local narratives, his point is well taken. It is therefore worth re-stating that, in the context of discourses on fetishism, the drive toward an absorbed or affirmative perspective does not demand complete conflation of the theorist’s and fetishist’s perspectives, even if such conflation were possible. But what it can and should demand, given the long history of the fetish’s demonization within Western philosophy, is an effort to reverse those strategies that have sought to *widen* the albeit necessary gap between the theoretical/practical, distanced/absorbed, or incredulous/credulous perspectives on the fetish object.

13. As we have seen, one of the central features of cultural postmodernism for Jameson is its “lack of historicity,” which gives rise to an emphasis on spatial representation. Harvey’s work pushes many of Jameson’s observations about space and postmodern *mapping* to their logical conclusions. Among theorists in the field of “postmodern geography,” which focuses most exclusively on postmodernism’s spatial dominant, the most prominent are probably Edward Soja and Derek Gregory.

PART TWO

FETISHISM AND FICTION

CHAPTER THREE

OBJECTIFYING POSTMODERNIST FICTION

There is a world inside the world.

--Don DeLillo, *Libra*

In Part One of this study, I examined the evolution of discourses about fetishism from their origins in seventeenth-century first-encounter narratives, to the most famous definitions of the fetish in Marx and Freud, and on into poststructuralist and postmodern revisions of those earlier theories. Part of my aim was to demonstrate, via this evolution, the persistence of two opposing perspectives in fetish discourse, which William Pietz characterizes in terms of their “distanced incredulity” and “absorbed credulity” with respect to the fetish’s magic. More importantly, however, I sought to emphasize that, even despite the reversal of hierarchical privilege accorded these twinned discourses over the past twenty years (a reversal which has seen the revenge of the absorbed perspective on the distanced or moralizing one), this shift has done little to challenge or displace one of the longest standing features of the distanced perspective itself, which is the portrayal of fetishism as an essentially unhistorical or anti-historical practice.

I attempted to remedy this situation by deriving, through close readings of the various theories which I presented, a provisional outline of fetishism as a practice with constructive historical potential. The enabling condition for this affirmative model was a more radical shift of privilege from distanced to absorbed perspectives than has heretofore been offered, even in the most affirmative revisionist theory. Nevertheless, I attempted to sketch the scope and consequences of this shift with reference to a number of existing theoretical paradigms. In the process, I argued that an absorbed perspective

on the fetish could be understood as a willingness to engage with the fetish as, first and foremost, an *ontological* rather than an epistemological problem. In so doing, I did not wish to suggest that an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a historical practice was necessarily committed to offering ontological justification for the fetish or for being *per se*. Neither did I have any illusions about radically separating ontological from epistemological interrogation. Rather, the ontological perspective as I envisioned it was defined by its acceptance of the fetish's ontological *difference* from other objects. For this reason, I was concerned with establishing that fetish discourse, composed historically of two competing perspectives, admits of a relative foregrounding of one mode of inquiry (either epistemological or ontological) to the extent that it privileges either the distanced or absorbed perspective on the fetish. In making this distinction, I was guided by Brian McHale's discussion of the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction, in which he defines the philosophical dominant of a narrative discourse as its ability to privilege one set of questions--either epistemological or ontological--as "more urgent" to its analysis than the other (11).

My perhaps paradoxical conclusion was that, in order to gain an understanding of this ontological orientation toward the fetish, it is necessary to accept the truth of fetishism as essentially narrative in nature. In other words, only by sheltering the problem of fetishism's truth as a sign of history within the originating gap of narrative itself could the fetish's ontological difference--its "unrepresentable materiality"--emerge as the central *matter* (in Butler's sense of the term) of fetishistic practice. I therefore hypothesized that fetishism as a historical practice would be most readily observable or

reconstructable from within a discourse which deliberately breaks down those binary distinctions--history/fiction, reality/fantasy--in which fetishism theoretically trades. I speculated that a good candidate for this illustrative discourse was postmodernist fiction, based on its recognized ontological dominant and its well-known interrogation of conventional temporal and historical models.

In Part Two of this study, my object is to justify the selection of postmodernist fiction as a discursive forum suited to elaborating the possibilities of fetishism as a historical practice. I shall begin by examining several of the more prominent models by which postmodernist fiction has been characterized and distinguished from earlier literary forms. I shall then argue, through close textual analyses of works by Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, John Hawkes, and Don DeLillo, that postmodern American fiction contributes to an understanding of fetishism as a historical practice through its effort to depict fetishism as a practice and a theory with revisionist historical and political potential. In developing this argument, I do not intend to reduce the novels under analysis to vehicles for confirming the claims of fetish theory. Although, in the present context, my interest in the work of Pynchon, Acker, Coover, Hawkes, and DeLillo lies with how it represents fetishism as historical practice, I also believe that an explication of how fetishism functions in these authors contributes to an understanding of postmodernist fiction in general terms. This is because, as I have suggested in Part One, an absorbed perspective on the fetish reveals many of the same conceptual fixations as postmodernist fiction: it affirms the possibility of multiple worlds, it constructs alternate histories and temporal models, and it strategically breaks down binary distinctions such as

subject/object, and theory/practice. Indeed, the depiction of fetishism as a historical practice can be interpreted as an off-shoot from, and concatenation of, many of the defining themes and formal properties of postmodernist fiction.

Of course I do not mean to imply that fetishism's relevance to the conventions of postmodernist fiction is merely fortuitous in the context of my analysis. As I have mentioned already, my alignment of the distanced and absorbed perspectives on the fetish with epistemological and ontological orientations has been accomplished under the auspices of broader distinctions made between modernist and postmodernist fiction (and between modernism and postmodernism as cultural formations).¹ It might thus be alleged that my conclusion about fetishism's narrative truth, and my identification of postmodernist fiction as the ideal discourse for elaborating the fetish's historical potential, have been preordained from the outset. To respond to such a charge, I can only reiterate that, by privileging one of fetishism's twinned perspectives through a well-defined set of assumptions about the relationship between narrative and history, I am doing no more than self-consciously foregrounding the analytical strategies of more conventional theories of fetishism. The difference is that, where conventional theories privilege the distanced perspective through recourse to established ideas about history and its linearity, my project is to affirm the absorbed perspective with the help of a literary form defined in part through its interrogation of established historical models.

My task in this chapter, then, is to pave the way for the textual analyses that will follow by showing how postmodernist fiction, in general terms, is a discourse appropriate to an elaboration of fetishism as a historical practice. In constructing this highly

provisional “fetishist poetics” of postmodern narrative, I shall begin by presenting the two most influential theories of postmodernist fiction to date, those of Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon. Each of these models is organized around a general descriptive feature that is relevant to a representation of fetishism as historical practice. In McHale’s definition, this feature is the ontological dominant to which I have already referred, and which leads, in postmodernist fiction, to representations of multiple worlds in complex relationships of overlap and collision. In Hutcheon, the defining aspect of postmodern narrative is its self-reflexive and parodic questioning of the historical record--a tendency that grounds her decision to retitling truly postmodern novels and stories as *historiographic metafiction*. Discussion of McHale and Hutcheon will then facilitate a briefer examination of more recent theoretical analyses of history and space in contemporary narrative. My aim in summarizing this body of theory will be to suggest that, if the predominant formal features of postmodernist fiction have been, and remain, its challenge to historical records, and its positing of multiple worlds that spatialize time and history, then the presentation of the fetish object serves, in theory, as an analytical site for assessing how these descriptive features relate and interconnect.

To validate this claim, I shall seek to delimit a place for the fetish as a special instance of postmodernist fiction’s distinctive representation of the object. This shall require, first, an assessment of how the object in postmodernist fiction differs from that of previous literary schools. Here I am aided by a return to the earliest critical readings and discussions of the French *nouveau roman*. By summarizing the philosophical and theoretical views of the most celebrated practitioner of the New Novel, Alain Robbe-

Grillet, as well as the first critical treatment of his work by Roland Barthes, I intend to isolate aspects of Robbe-Grillet's "assassination of the object" which accord with an absorbed perspective on the fetish. Then, because the New Novel is not universally recognized as a postmodern narrative form, I shall go on to analyze recent theoretical models which have incorporated the *nouveau roman*, and its representation of the object, within their descriptions of the unique temporal economy of postmodern narrative. Most important among such theories, I shall argue, is that of Ruth Ronen, whose detailed work on possible worlds and narrative temporality shows how the "metaphor of chronology" in fiction--especially postmodernist fiction--inevitably binds temporal indicators to ontological ones. Ronen's work provides a conceptual framework within which an absorbed perspective on the fetish can be constructed in general terms as the fictional *actualization* of an object through processes which call attention to the object's ontological status as a link between multiple worlds and multiple temporal systems. To test the validity of this general "fetishist poetics," I conclude by offering brief readings of two contemporary American short stories, Ann Beattie's "Janus" and A. M. Homes's "A Real Doll," both of which portray the fetish object as a kind of ontological world or reality in itself.

Some Ontologies of Postmodernist Fiction

In Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time (1992), Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth defines a "new temporality" of postmodernism in terms of a shift from traditional linear and objective models of historical time toward more

subjective, situational and “rhythmic” models. In the course of her argument, Ermarth makes use of a number of theoretical and literary texts; but she privileges fictional narrative as the discourse best able to portray the new temporality she describes:

Postmodern narrative language engages pulse and intellect simultaneously and consequently permits no easy escape from practical problems. It focuses on *practices* and refuses in so many ways to accept the distinction between practice and thought, between material and transcendental “reality.” Such narrative literally recalls readers to their senses by focusing acts of attention on the actual practices of consciousness as they operate in process, and not as they might operate if the world were the rational, natural, logocentric place that so many of our models still describe. In short, postmodern narrative does much to show what the contemporary critique of Western metaphysics amounts to in practice and for a subjectivity in process. It is arguable that, at least in terms of temporality and language, novels articulate the postmodern critique more fully and certainly more accessibly than do most theoretical texts. (12)

In light of my present aim, which is to explain why postmodernist fiction is an appropriate place to search out the dynamics of fetishism as a historical practice, this passage is obviously attractive to me for a number of reasons. Ermarth provides support for my turn toward fiction by arguing that postmodern narrative is better able to document changes to historical models than is theory. In addition, Ermarth draws attention to the way that postmodern narratives concretize abstract theoretical formulations in observable practice. This justifies, in part, my claim that the philosophical shift from distanced to absorbed perspectives on fetishism can best be accomplished by a shift of analytical focus from theory to fiction. Finally, what Ermarth describes as fiction’s ability to blend reader-reaction at the level of “pulse and intellect” is one which I find especially promising to an effort that would rediscover, in postmodern narrative, some of the fetish’s “untheorizable” materiality. Nevertheless, for all its

eloquence, Ermarth's explanation does not do my work for me. Fetishism, unlike the revision of historical models, is not a characteristic typically associated with postmodernist fiction. Although I shall argue that fetishism as a historical practice can be taken as a special instance of such revision, it is impossible to justify such a claim without more detailed analysis.

One of the most influential definitions of postmodernist fiction is that of Brian McHale. In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), McHale distinguishes between modernism and postmodernism in narrative by relying upon Roman Jakobson's concept of the *dominant* as the "focusing" component of a work of art (6). Where the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*, according to McHale, postmodernist fiction is defined by its essentially *ontological* focus. This shift can be recognized in the types of questions which are foregrounded by a reading of modernist and postmodernist texts. The modernist novel or short story, often dominated by one or more "centers of consciousness" interacting within a stable (and singular) social world, concerns itself with the problems of *how* knowledge is attained, and by whom, and on what basis authority and knowledge are established. In contrast to these essentially epistemological questions, the postmodernist novel, which tends to depict multiple worlds in various stages of contact and overlap, is preoccupied with ontological questions about *which* world one inhabits at a given time, and how one's knowledge will enable survival within that environment (6-10). It is important to note, however, that McHale does not portray the postmodern turn from epistemological to ontological concerns as absolute. Instead, the difference is marked by a shift of *emphasis* which the fictional text is able to enforce

through various rhetorical and formal strategies:

This in a nutshell is the function of the dominant: it specifies the *order* in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications. In postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology.
(11)

Through this concept of the dominant, McHale is able to trace his shift from modernism to postmodernism in the artistic evolution of authors ranging from Nabokov to Robbe-Grillet to Pynchon, as well as in the development and refinement of numerous formal devices, from extended metaphor to *mise-en-abyme*.

As McHale points out, he is not the first to suggest that contemporary writers have tended to distance themselves from the epistemological problematics which permeate the novels of modernists like Faulkner, Joyce, or Woolf. Nor, for that matter, is McHale the first to characterize the postmodernist mode of interrogation as essentially ontological in nature.² But what does make his book unique is its use of possible worlds discourse to shed light on the types of ontological questions posed by postmodern narrative. Drawing on theoretical contributions from Thomas Pavel, Umberto Eco, and Lubimir Dolezel, among others, McHale combines possible worlds theory with fictional analysis in a way which supports his claim that postmodernism is, itself, not an observable phenomenon “‘out there’ in the world” (4), but rather a construction designed to facilitate explanatory discourse. As McHale makes very clear, to define the dominant of postmodernist fiction as ontological is not to maintain that postmodern novels orient themselves toward a philosophical grounding of the *actual* world. Instead, the ontological focus of these

novels must be understood in relation to what Pavel describes as the *descriptive* ontology of possible worlds (McHale 27). In this context, the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction denotes a propensity for describing worlds in the plural, for depicting the fragmentation and collapse of worlds, and, most importantly, for detailing the means and consequences of collisions *between* worlds.³

Perhaps the most prevalent feature of postmodernist fiction, and a central device in its depiction of worlds-in-collision, is its dramatization of *metalepsis*. Dolezel defines *metalepsis* as a “violation of ontological boundaries,” in which a character or object from one world intervenes or penetrates into another world. In his study of the theoretical cross-over between possible worlds and literary studies, Dolezel portrays metafiction as itself an extended representation of *metalepsis*:

Surely, the project of metafiction is to create impossible worlds, to bring about the impossible coexistence of ontologically heterogeneous persons--the actual participants of fictional communication and the fictional artifacts constructed and reconstructed in this communication. In other words, metafiction is a case of *metalepsis*. (166)

In McHale’s understanding of postmodernist fiction, *metalepsis* is a frequent occurrence in both metafictional and less formally self-reflexive texts, but it is especially prevalent in novels with an historical focus. This is because the postmodern historical novel, through its heterogeneous structure and metafictional impulse, pushes to an extreme the ontological plurality that inheres in all historical fictions. According to McHale, even traditional historical novels display *metalepsis* to a certain degree because they incorporate real historical figures (or *realemes*) into the fabric of a fictional narrative, bringing them into contact with fictional characters. A traditional historical novel,

however, takes a number of strategic measures to conceal the “ontological seams” that inevitably emerge when fictional characters come face to face with *realemes*. Foremost among these strategies is the confinement of the narrative present (or *sujhet*) of the story to the gaps or “dark areas” of received history--a tactic which attempts to minimize any contradictions between fiction and history (86-88). By contrast, postmodernist novels often draw attention to their ontological seams, deliberately challenging the official record of events through apocryphal histories or flagrant anachronisms. The result, according to McHale, is that postmodern historical novels “imply that history itself may be a form of fiction” (96). Just as the process of world-construction in postmodernist fiction sometimes imitates Derrida’s method of writing *sous rature*--rhetorically “X-ing out” or denying the possibility of the worlds it describes (McHale, *Postmodernist* 100-06)--so too does postmodern narrative exemplify a fundamentally *deconstructive* relationship between history and fiction.⁴

By implicating the concept of an ontological dominant in an interrogation of the history/fiction divide, McHale’s model offers some support for my claim that postmodernist fiction is essentially amenable to a presentation of fetishism as a historical practice. Yet this support is limited, primarily because McHale refuses to see postmodernist fiction’s interrogation of history as anything but deconstructive. Although he devotes attention to the process of world-construction in postmodern narrative, he does not address the corresponding issue of how such texts might enable new formulations or constructions of history and its traces. For another influential theory which addresses this issue in more detail, I turn now to Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988).

Hutcheon is in agreement with McHale to the extent that he defines the distinction between modernism and postmodernism as essentially discourse-based, rather than historically or economically driven. For Hutcheon, however, the shift of rhetorical emphasis which signals the postmodern is not one from epistemological to ontological dominants. In her view, representative postmodernist texts always posit both ontological and epistemological questions (50). Rather, for Hutcheon, postmodernism is characterized in fiction and theory by its eschewing of binary formulations and its foregrounding of *immanent* contradiction: “the postmodern partakes of a logic of ‘both/and,’ not one of ‘either/or’” (49). Always complicit with the very codes and ideologies it attempts to disrupt, postmodernist cultural practice is governed by its essential irony, and seeks the affirmation of *difference* rather than *otherness* (4-6). Nevertheless, although Hutcheon, in keeping with her object of study, emphasizes contradiction over dialectic, and minimal difference over hierarchy (100), she designates one cultural form as the privileged exemplar of postmodernism’s formal and political workings. *Historiographic metafiction*, which is Hutcheon’s term for self-reflexive and parodic historical novels like Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1973) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), is particularly conducive to the examination of postmodernist poetics because it embodies all of those narrative forms--fiction, history, and theory--typically addressed in critical descriptions of the postmodern (5).

Hutcheon’s model is thus both more and less comprehensive than that of McHale. On the one hand, it engages more directly with contemporary cultural theory, seeking to challenge the totalizing views of Jameson and Baudrillard, among others. At the same

time, Hutcheon's privileging of historiographic metafiction amounts to a categorical dismissal of many other fictional forms and genres:

I would like to argue [. . .] that the term postmodernism in fiction be reserved to describe the more paradoxical and historically complex form that I have been calling 'historiographic metafiction.' Surfiction and the New Novel are like abstract art: they do not so much transgress codes of representation as leave them alone (40).

Indeed, surfiction and the *nouveau roman* are not the only contemporary forms that Hutcheon's theory ignores. Her model is also silent about--if not dismissive of--the non-fiction novel, the New Journalism, and cyberpunk, all of which play a role in McHale's definition of postmodernist fiction.⁵ Of course, by reducing the scope of postmodernist fiction to include only politically contestatory historical novels, Hutcheon is better able to refute the claims of those cultural theorists, like Jameson, who denigrate postmodernism's nostalgic and apolitical cannibalization of the past. This refutation, however, comes at the cost of ignoring or downplaying the importance of a good many writers (John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Hunter S. Thompson, and Kathy Acker, to consider only the American scene) who figure prominently in most other discussions of postmodern narrative.

For purposes of assessing the compatibility between postmodernist fiction and fetishism as a historical practice, however, Hutcheon's model has one advantage over McHale's: it provides a more detailed analysis of the interaction between fiction and history as narrative forms. In Hutcheon's view, historiographic metafiction does not merely challenge the distinction between history and fiction; rather, it sets out to portray history as a human construct, and to assess the impact of history's constructedness on its

status as an explanatory metanarrative (16). Through its metafictional musings and historical references, postmodernist fiction organizes itself around the unresolved theoretical contradiction between the formal (narrative) and historical (archival) dimensions of historiography. In this it reflects Hayden White's observations regarding the difficulty of separating form and content in historical narratives. Moreover, by questioning the validity and reliability of the documents and memories which authorize history, historiographic metafiction also addresses the status of the historical trace, as discussed by Paul Ricoeur and Dominick LaCapra.⁶ And by raising the issue of *whose* history is preserved by the historical record, and at what expense, such fictions betray their sympathy for the common historiographic distinction between events and facts. According to this distinction, events become facts only through their inclusion in historical narratives (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 121-22). Hence in postmodernist fiction,

The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past. Needless to say, the postmodern raising of these questions offers few answers, but this provisionality does not result in some sort of historical relativism or presentism. It rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts, in strong terms, the specificity and particularity of the individual past event. Nevertheless, it also realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know that past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process. (122)

Historiographic metafiction does not challenge classical distinctions between history and fiction by establishing any fundamental equivalence between the two on the basis of their common narrative form(s). Instead, according to Hutcheon, it challenges these distinctions by emphasizing that the *referents* of both fiction and history are always and only more *texts* (119).

As a consequence of challenging the ontological difference between the referents of history and fiction, Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction ends up playing across the boundary that separates theory from practice. Though no strict definition of practice emerges in Hutcheon's model (her usage connotes artistic practice, especially with fictional texts as the end products), this is, one can assume, an intentional gap in her theory, and betokens her effort to develop a poetics that "would not seek to place itself in a position *between* theory and practice on the question of history, but rather would seek a position *within* both" (17). Hutcheon here anticipates Ermarth's claim that fictional narrative best exhibits postmodernism's interrogation of temporality because it combines theory and practice. Historiographic metafiction, for Hutcheon, is inherently "self-decoding," displaying deconstructive habits normally associated with critical readers (211). This is a point that has also been made by detractors of postmodernist fiction.⁷ Yet regardless of how one interprets the cross-over between theory and fiction, or theory and practice, its import for enabling a more absorbed perspective on fetishism is clear. If postmodernist fiction is able to confuse theory and practice where history is concerned, then it would appear to support a challenge to those tactics by which the traditional distanced (or epistemological) perspective on fetishism is maintained. Although Hutcheon retreats from characterizing the postmodern turn as a shift from epistemological to ontological dominants, the descriptive privilege which she affords to historiographic metafiction can be taken as indicative of that shift to the extent that it casts doubt on conventional assumptions about the explanatory superiority of theory.

Although published over a decade ago, the influence of McHale's and Hutcheon's

descriptive models remains strong on more recent discussions of postmodernist fiction. This longevity can, I think, be attributed to a number of factors: both models are well-grounded in contemporary theory; both are international in scope; and both downplay close textual reading in order to identify broad formal trends--a move which leaves considerable room for the application and refinement of these theories by later critics. Perhaps most important of all in determining the influence of these models is the fact that both portray postmodernist fiction as, if not politically interventionist in nature, at least partially mimetic of the forms or practices of postmodern culture at large.⁸ McHale and Hutcheon have thus effectively answered and, to a great extent, done away with earlier critical discussions of postmodernist fiction that attempted to disregard the form as elitist, overly hermetic, or devoid of moral and political relevance.⁹ To find similarities that would explain their comparable degree of influence is not, however, to overlook the important differences that separate these two descriptive models. Indeed, much of the most interesting work on postmodernist fiction in recent years has set itself the task of forging links between the ontological dominant theorized by McHale, and the parodic and paradoxical questioning of history that is central in Hutcheon.

Martha Tuck Rozett, for example, relies on both McHale and Hutcheon to support her argument that postmodernist fiction, by asserting the essential textuality of history, is formally committed to New Historicist methodology (145). Amy Elias bridges the theoretical gap between McHale and Hutcheon by arguing that postmodernist historical fiction *spatializes* history as "a series of experiential 'planes'" (111). Binding McHale's concept of ontological plurality to Hutcheon's observations about the

interrogation of historical records, Elias posits a relationship between history and text that is both deconstructive *and* constructive:

Postmodernist historical novels reformulate history by countering historical linearity with other, more disjunctive, spatial metaphors. They disrupt linearity much the way cubism disrupted “mimetic” representation in the plastic arts. They thus attack the notion that linear *narrative* is the mimetic counterpart to linear, progressive *history* (and thence attack the validity of traditional representations of history). (110)

Likewise, Joseph Francese’s book-length study of the relationships between time and space in postmodern narrative emphasizes the *reconstructive* potential of postmodernist fiction, which he defines in terms similar to those of Hutcheon. Banishing purely metafictional or ludic texts to the province of late modernism, Francese elaborates the historical and political potential of what he calls “oppositional postmodernist narrations” (162). These fictions are defined by their dialogic resistance to both conventional models of history and the “radical historical relativism” of much contemporary theory (162). In Francese’s model, authors like Toni Morrison and E. L. Doctorow receive the majority of attention because their multivocal (as opposed to broodingly self-conscious) texts “do not reduce all praxis to literary history. Instead, they recuperate and valorize in the present those untextualized traces of past reality that survive in conscious and unconscious memory and in orally transmitted knowledge” (108).¹⁰ Most recently of all, Santiago Juan-Navarro’s “inter-American” approach to postmodernist fiction takes on both McHale and Hutcheon in identifying commonalities between contemporary fiction in the United States and Latin America. Juan-Navarro sides with Hutcheon in her rejection of McHale’s ontological dominant; but he goes on to argue that Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernist fiction is too reductive and simplistic to achieve its global descriptive aims

(286). According to Juan-Navarro, by restricting the relationship between self-reflexiveness and historical reference in historiographic metafiction to *contradiction*, Hutcheon fails to recognize the dialectical and utopian aspects of much American and Latin American postmodernism (287). Juan-Navarro's readings of Fuentes, Reed, Cortázar, and Doctorow demonstrate that these authors accomplish much more than the representation of politically neutral paradox, going so far as to communicate an "emotional and intuitive vision of history" (290).

There are other studies that could be cited in this vein; but I mention these ones because they foreground properties of postmodernist fiction that imply its amenability to representations of fetishism as historical practice. The metaleptic impulse of postmodern narrative, revealed in its formal propensity for portraying multiple worlds and their collisions, is in keeping with a "relativist" perspective on the relationship between truth and reality. By emphasizing questions about *which* world or reality a given discourse describes, postmodern narrative backgrounds epistemological truth-problematics (or the question of how truth is determined) in order to foreground what Francesca Benedict, in her reading of postmodernist fiction, calls the "debate on the status of Reality" (126):

Although there no longer is one single unified and unifying global History, the principle of collectivity remains, albeit redefined. Individual interest and point of view are given new importance but must be inscribed in a frame--that of the collectivity. The permutation of History in histories does not only recognize the diversity of the global community, it also allows the inscription of the individual (beyond the typical hero) into the stream of recorded events while it simultaneously questions the very idea of the "recorded." [. . .] It hardly needs to be said that the idea of Truth no longer plays a role in such historical constructions. (124)

While I would revise Benedict's final sentence from "Truth no longer plays a role" to

“Truth’s role is backgrounded,” she formulates here a relationship between collective and individual histories which an absorbed model of fetishism would seek to develop. As I have maintained throughout Part One of this study, an affirmation of fetishism as a historical practice necessitates situating the issue of the fetish’s historical *truth* in its constitutive narrative gap, in order to draw attention to the fetish’s materiality as an ontological or metaleptic threat. As I have also stressed, however, the fetishist’s ontological orientation toward affirming multiple worlds and histories does not invalidate the notion of collective history; it merely *deprivileges* that notion (which depends, as Benedict points out, on an ideal of consensus) in order to admit the validity of the individual perspective. Here Hutcheon’s comments on the changed concept of consensus in postmodernism are pertinent:

What is important in all these internalized challenges to humanism is the interrogating of the notion of consensus. Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgement of differences--in theory and in artistic practice. In its most extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus [. . .]. (*Poetics* 7)

The revision of consensus to an “illusion of consensus” has interesting connotations when considering the historical potential of fetishism. The fetish’s traditionally demonized powers of illusion and concealment turn back on the notion of consensus itself once the ontological difference of the fetish is recognized.

Furthermore, postmodernist fiction provides formal narrative strategies for revealing the fetish’s ontological difference, particularly where it examines the nature of the historical trace or archive. By self-consciously dramatizing the way in which events

are transformed into facts, historiographic metafiction questions the concept of factuality itself. In this it reopens a historical debate in Western philosophy which, according to Peter Pels, has long ties to discourses on fetishism (108-10). If Juan-Navarro is correct in asserting that, as a result of postmodernism, “the genre of the novel is treated as a privileged scenario for a revision of the past” (290), then that privileged status serves the affirmation of fetishism as historical practice because postmodernist fiction admits histories culled from traces other than those of conventionally authorized archives.

At the same time, however, mention of alternative historical traces draws attention to an important fact about the theories thus far discussed: they make little or no mention of the role of the *object* in postmodernist fiction. This omission is not a peculiarity of the models I have presented, but reflects the majority of theorizing on the modernism/postmodernism divide. While fundamental differences in the construction of the subject are frequently posited when speaking of a postmodern turn, there has been little corresponding analysis of what, if anything, distinguishes the portrayal of the object in modernist and postmodernist texts. Of the studies presented above, only McHale’s addresses this question in any detail. Objects in postmodernist fiction, according to McHale, are more likely than those in modernist or realist texts to call attention to their *ontological gaps*: points of indeterminacy which arise from the impossibility of giving a complete description of any fictional entity.¹¹ At times, postmodern narratives glory in the sense of incompleteness or “cloudiness” that results when descriptive constitution of an object is interrupted (31-32). But McHale offers no explanation of what effect, if any, this attention to the ontological gaps of fictional objects might have on the construction of

alternative histories or historical models. Given that recognition of fetishism as a historical practice ultimately depends on a shift of perspective on the fetish object, it is appropriate to ask whether or not the historical revision or ontological plurality of postmodernist fiction bears upon, or is reflected in, its presentation of the object.

In searching for an answer to that question, I shall look now to an alternative strand of theorizing about contemporary fiction--one whose roots extend as far back as Roland Barthes' 1950s essays on the *nouveau roman*. The experimental school of fiction largely founded by the early works and explanatory essays of French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet is notorious for the central function which it accords the fictional object. Discussion of the New Novel, which is largely absent from the general models of postmodernist fiction examined above, re-emerges in the work of another group of theorists and critics concerned specifically with the portrayal of time, space, and possible worlds in contemporary fiction.

To Assassinate the Object

Whatever else can be said of the *nouveau roman*, one is probably safe in observing, as does Jameson, that it "had something to do with *things*" (*Postmodernism* 135, emphasis his). Barthes' critical summary of Robbe-Grillet's first novel, *Les Gommages* (1953), as a "definitive interrogation of the object" (24), established the framework within which much subsequent analysis of the New Novel would be cast. Confirmed by Robbe-Grillet's own essays on the subject, the recognition of a profound challenge to earlier fictional representations of the object is crucial to understanding the *nouveau*

roman.

Before proceeding any further, however, I should acknowledge that, in returning to early theories of the New Novel, I am implying a continuity between this experimental form and postmodernist fiction which is by no means unanimously accepted. While several recent studies (which I discuss below) have accorded the *nouveau roman* special consideration for its “postmodern” representation of time and space, both Hutcheon and McHale deny a place for the early novels of Robbe-Grillet, such as *Les Gommages* and *La Jalousie* (1957), in their models of postmodernist fiction.¹² Although my sympathies obviously lie with the former group, my engagement with the aesthetics of the New Novel is not an attempt to try and settle the issue of whether or not it is a postmodernist or late modernist form. In the present context, I am less interested in the novels themselves than in Robbe-Grillet’s and Barthes’ early critical essays about them. These essays testify to the possibility of a metaphysical and narrative shift of perspective on the object that has important implications for an absorbed perspective on fetishism, and, I would suggest, for the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction.

Barthes’ first essay on Robbe-Grillet, “Littérature objective: Alain Robbe-Grillet” (1954), is the one which deals most exclusively with the novelist’s challenge to classical representations of the object.¹³ In this essay, Barthes offers a structuralist reading of Robbe-Grillet’s first novel, *Les Gommages*, and argues that, “By his exclusive and tyrannical appeal to the sense of sight, Robbe-Grillet undoubtedly intends the assassination of the object, at least as literature has traditionally represented it” (16). This “assassination” is carried out according to a deliberate formal strategy, which Barthes

breaks down into three key components: anthological description, the ruthless elimination of the adjective, and the substitution of plot development with circular or “specular” time.

By *anthological* description, Barthes refers to Robbe-Grillet’s unsettling tendency to provide descriptive information about objects out of all proportion to their importance in the flow of the narrative. Objects which would normally be mentioned only to provide background or context for a scene of action frequently become, in *The Erasers*, points of such focalized interest that they disrupt the flow of the narrative. This descriptive fastidiousness has the effect, according to Barthes, of granting the object a sense of *presence* utterly divorced from its ostensible function. Interestingly, however, that presence is confined to the sensory register of sight:

But the *description* of the object somehow exceeds its function in every case, and at the very moment we expect the author’s interest to lapse, having exhausted the object’s instrumentality, that interest persists, *insists*, bringing the narrative to a sudden, untimely halt and transforming a simple implement into space. Its usefulness, we discover, was merely an illusion, only its optical extension is real--its humanity begins where its function leaves off. (15)

Devoid of odour, texture, and all other tactile qualities normally assumed to inhere in fictional objects, Robbe-Grillet’s object becomes “merely the occasion of a certain optical resistance” (13).

This simultaneous heightening of interest in, and radical reduction of, the object as a sensual presence is closely connected to the second of the novelist’s formal innovations: his stripping away of the object’s *analogical* resonance. By limiting descriptive qualification to a matter of spatial positioning, Robbe-Grillet conducts an

attack on the adjective itself, denying the object any metaphorical, symbolic, or psychological relevance. As a result, the object becomes a depthless configuration of surfaces, with no symbolic substance (13-14). Paradoxically, however, it is Robbe-Grillet's refusal to abide metaphorical or psychological meaning that grants the object its new "humanity." In Barthes' reading, the object's inability to serve as a mirror of human intention or desire enables it to siphon off a degree of subjectivity for itself, which it expresses through the mystery of its implacable visual presence. The reader, then, experiences the essential "*thereness*" of the fictional object as the inability to conceive of any allegorical or utopian *elsewhere* (14).

Finally, both of these strategic delimitations enable the third, and most important, formal distinction of Robbe-Grillet's work, which is its subjection of the object to the rigours of a purely optical and spatial representation of time. By freeing the object from the yokes of adjective and metaphor, and by stripping it of all but its visual properties, Robbe-Grillet's project is to render the object the harbinger of a new sense of time figured as spatial movement. To accomplish this goal requires revising that "radical eschatology of matter" which defines the classical relationship between materiality and time. According to Barthes, the common notion of time as a linear progression finds analogical representation in the gradual decay of material objects; but in Robbe-Grillet, where no such decay is visible, and where plot is inevitably circular, new figural analogies for time must be derived from the unexplained repositioning of objects from scene to scene. Reduced to a series of visible relocations in space, time achieves continuity only through the assumption of something *forgotten*, or *hidden*, in a visual

space (like that between frames of a comic strip) to which the reader's eye has not been given access (22). Ultimately, in Barthes' view, "[t]his intermittent withdrawal is the definitive and central act of Robbe-Grillet's experiment: to keep man from participating in or even witnessing the *fabrication* or the *becoming* of objects, and ultimately to exile the world to the life of its own surface" (23-24).

That Barthes' conclusions about the representation of time and the object in Robbe-Grillet's early work remain valid for the later novels is readily demonstrated. The opening pages of *In the Labyrinth* (1959) offer a shorthand version of the formal interaction which Barthes describes between temporality and the unseen relocation of objects:

On the polished wood of the table, the dust has marked the places occupied for a while--for a few hours, several days, minutes, weeks--by small objects subsequently removed whose outlines are still distinct for some time, a circle, a square, a rectangle, other less simple shapes, some partly overlapping, already blurred or half obliterated as though by a rag.
(141)

Time's indeterminacy as *duration*, which is emphasized in this passage, leaves open the possibility of refiguring its movement from linear progression to spatial models based on "other less simple shapes." Yet rather than ferret out additional passages like this in order to support Barthes' thesis, it is more expedient to examine Robbe-Grillet's own explanations of his work.¹⁴ Robbe-Grillet's earliest essays on the New Novel, and the formal devices which define it, are so much in keeping with those of Barthes that they seem, at times, like straightforward endorsements of Barthes' critical views.

In "A Future for the Novel" (1956), Robbe-Grillet confirms in particular Barthes' reading of the object's visual presence as a "*thereness*" which exceeds its signification or

function. Whereas, in previous novelistic forms, objects and gestures are transformed into *signs*, and disappear under the mantle of human intention, the novel of the future, according to Robbe-Grillet, will be set apart for its depiction of the essential alienness of things:

In this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be *there* before being *something*; and they will be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own "meaning," that meaning which vainly tries to reduce them to the role of precarious tools, of a temporary and shameful fabric woven exclusively--and deliberately--by the superior human truth expressed in it, only to cast out this awkward auxiliary into immediate oblivion and darkness.

Henceforth, on the contrary, objects will gradually lose their instability and their secrets, will renounce the pseudo-mystery, that suspect interiority which Roland Barthes has called the "romantic heart of things." No longer will objects be merely the vague reflection of the hero's vague soul, the image of his torments, the shadow of his desires. (21)

Particularly unwelcome in Robbe-Grillet's "future universe" are sociological, psychoanalytic, and metaphysical theories which insert objects into closed systems of reference, preserving illusions about an inherent depth to the external world.

In subsequent essays, Robbe-Grillet expounds further the New Novelist's program for rejecting descriptive vocabularies which mythologize and falsify nature and the object. In "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy" (1958), he defends himself against the claims of moralizing critics who condemn his novels on the basis of their anti-humanism. Clarifying the directedness of his attack, via the object, on humanistic philosophy, Robbe-Grillet states that his novels aim not to deny humanity but, rather, to liberate the human subject. The rejection of anthropomorphic language and metaphor does not attack humanism in general--only that "pananthropic" notion endemic to it, which forecloses humankind's relationship to the object world:

Man looks at the world, and the world does not look back at him. Man sees things and discovers, now, that he can escape the metaphysical pact others had once concluded for him, and thereby escape servitude and terror. That he can. . . that he *may*, at least, some day.

(58, emphasis and ellipses his)

Eventually, humanity will no longer experience the alienness of the natural world as a lack or threat. The *nouveau roman*, as Robbe-Grillet envisions it, anticipates that future by attempting to render as neutrally as possible the distance that separates the human from the object world. To that end, the privileging of visual description is only logical, given that sight, “if it seeks to remain simply that, leaves things in their respective place” (73).

To read Barthes and Robbe-Grillet in light of contemporary fetish theory is to discover a descriptive methodology which can be read as an effort to capture, in fiction, that “untranscended materiality” excised by conventional theories of fetishism. The *nouveau roman*, according to Barthes and Robbe-Grillet, aims at dramatizing an encounter with the object that asserts its inexplicable *presence*. At least in terms of its end result, this encounter is in keeping with the first-encounter narratives of fetish formation described by Pietz, which bring the fetishist face to face with a materiality that refuses to signify beyond itself. As well, Robbe-Grillet’s efforts to divest the object of sociological and psychological meaning anticipate Deleuze and Guattari on the subject of fetishism, in particular their statement that the fetish should be analyzed outside the sphere of anthropology, sociology or psychoanalysis. Finally, denuded of utilitarian and signifying functions, the object’s ability, as theorized by Barthes, to challenge the viewing subject, and to claim a portion of humanity for itself, is very much in keeping

with the powers of Baudrillard's fatal object. The *nouveau roman* gives provisional narrative form to that alternative experience of time which Baudrillard describes, by way of the fatal object, as "destiny."

Of course, these affinities between the New Novel and contemporary fetish theory are, it must be emphasized, only methodological. In the essays which I have cited, Robbe-Grillet and Barthes refer only to generic objects, not singular fetishes. Robbe-Grillet's understanding of the encounter between object and viewer--"[m]an looks at the world, and the world does not look back at him"--drives home the difference between looking at fetishes and looking at common objects. To be sure, this difference is not theoretically insurmountable, especially insofar as Robbe-Grillet's assumption of the gulf between subject and object depends on his questionable claim that visual observation can achieve analytical neutrality in its apprehension of objects. But rather than attempt to bring the New Novel more in line with discourses on fetishism, I want to examine a few studies which have used the New Novel, and the theories surrounding it, to elaborate concepts of time and narrative that are either specific to the postmodern sensibility, or actualized in postmodernist fiction. As we shall see, a commonality between these approaches, which sets them apart from models like those of Hutcheon or Benedict, is their concern with the postmodern address to history and historical authority via the medium of *time* and *temporality*.

I have already cited one of these studies. In *Sequel to History*, Elizabeth Ermarth engages directly with those who would reject the New Novel's strategies for challenging history:

Those inclined to dismiss the new novel and everything it stands for usually single out for special opprobrium its departure from historical conventions and its always implicit idea that “the past” is a function of consciousness. [. . .] This objection is important because it touches on the heart of the problem in postmodern narrative, and the answer to this objection is complex. In simple summary, this objection betrays a fear of substituting a false history for a true one, a fear that simply restates in another form precisely the historical conventions in question. The postmodern subversion of faith in “fact” (the very idea of “fact” is necessarily historical) goes far beyond any mere revision or substitution of one “history” for another; its subversion undermines the very confidence that one can or could ever isolate a single or true track of history. (71)

Rather than attack history by quibbling with accepted facts, the New Novel, in Ermarth’s reading, upsets historical conventions by targeting the often unstated assumptions about time which underpin them. Central among these is what Ermarth calls the “ontological dependence between individual consciousness and historical time” (117). By forcing the reader to engage in multi-level thinking, and perpetually frustrating his or her desire for temporal coherence, fictions like those of Robbe-Grillet (which Ermarth claims as postmodern) force the reader to acknowledge his or her own subjective disintegration (107). The result is that objective historical time, derived as a metaphysical concept from the supposed continuity of subjective consciousness, is fractured and pluralized. Ironically, it is this effect that makes the reading of the New Novel an essentially *mimetic* activity, since it reproduces the disordered, non-linear functioning of consciousness itself.¹⁵

More recently, Andrew Gibson’s *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (1996) also affords a prominent place to Robbe-Grillet and the New Novel in its treatment of the “anti-narrativity” of modernist and postmodernist experimental writing. Like Ermarth, Gibson locates a significant threat to conventional (and especially

narratological) notions of temporality in fiction that enacts the breakdown of stable subject positions (199). Relying on Deleuzian terminology, Gibson argues that *chronos* (continuous or linear time) is radically compromised by novels like Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur*, which substitute a *rhizomatic* relationship between time and space for the "logic of boxes" favoured by narratological models. Rather than adhering to narratology's implicit reliance on a pre-existent, singular space as the referent of time and events, *The Voyeur* presents temporal progress as a movement *between* heterogeneous spaces, and between diegetic levels of the text (221-28). By thus resisting narratology's hierarchical "stratifying procedures" for organizing time, novels like that of Robbe-Grillet bring about a pluralizing of the narratological imaginary capable of admitting the concept of time as spatial multiplicity.

Finally, and most valuable of all in the present context, Ruth Ronen's study, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (1994), again treats the New Novel as exemplary of the means by which fiction can revise the relationship between chronology and narrative. Here, however, the motivational concern is not to define, as in Ermarth or Gibson, either a specifically postmodern concept of temporality, or a postmodern theory of narrative. On the contrary, Ronen seeks to advance a theory of how fictional discourse in general constructs worlds, objects, and time, and to accomplish her goal, she draws upon the symbiotic relationship between literary theory and that of possible worlds. Despite Ronen's generalist focus, however, postmodern narrative occupies center stage at several points throughout her study because, as she points out, attempts to define postmodernist fiction (McHale's in particular) have proven the strongest spur to the incorporation of

possible worlds theory within literary analysis (141, note 13). McHale's emphasis on worlds-in-collision as a key indicator of the ontological dominant also points to the increasingly *descriptive* (rather than justificatory) role of possible worlds theory in literary studies. In Ronen's view, it is postmodernism's "relaxation" of truth standards in general that enables the use of possible worlds discourse to delineate the strategies for building worlds, objects, and temporal relationships in fiction (35-40).¹⁶

The New Novel is important to this endeavour because it demonstrates, among other things, the impact of possible worlds theory on the relationship between chronology and narrative order, or the "objective order" of events and the order in which they are *told*. One of Ronen's central claims is that chronological and temporal terms, when used in fiction, serve only a *metaphorical* function. Robbe-Grillet's take on the crime novel, *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965), deliberately breaks down the idea of a pre-existing chronology of events against which the order of their narration in the text might be juxtaposed. Composed of a series of often contradictory narrative fragments woven together without interruption or chapter breaks, the novel reads in many ways like a collection of theatrical or cinematic scenes, each presenting alternative perspectives on the novel's events. This cinematic framework is emphasized repeatedly through language that also lends temporal continuity (or the illusion of such) to the scenes in question: "But meanwhile there has been the episode of the broken glass [. . .]," "Then comes the scene of the shopwindow [. . .]," "It is just at this moment that the British police have burst into the large salon [. . .]" (41-43). As the ordering of events becomes increasingly complex and contradictory, their verifiable reality is rendered suspect as well, until the

cinematic or theatrical *texture* of the novel's narration assumes a degree of mystery as compelling as the various crimes it seems to depict. In Ronen's view, by thus privileging the *modes* of telling through which events are narrated, Robbe-Grillet's novel draws special attention to something that is true of all fiction: temporal relations, as expressed in fictional narrative, do not correspond to a pre-existent chronological order of events, but instead to different *modal* and *ontological* levels within a text. The words "past," "present," and "future," when used in fiction, signal relations between ontological realms which are distinguished from one another based on the degree of *actualization* of the entities they depict. The "present" of a fictional text is made up of those events, actions, and entities depicted or actualized in the primary narrative level, while past and future (and alternate imagined or hallucinated versions of any of these) are presented as compressed, embedded or nested narratives, typically lacking the distinctness and immediacy of the narrative present. Nevertheless, every one of these narratives, according to Ronen, constitutes a distinct world within the text: "[e]ach level of the narrative implies shifting to another world, to another modality relative to the actual 'presentness' of the primary level of narrative" (212). When temporal relations are deliberately spatialized, as in experimental novels like those of Robbe-Grillet, this spatial movement is just another metaphorical representation of the fundamentally *ontological* world-hopping on which fictional time is predicated.

That Ronen uses Robbe-Grillet's work to illustrate her point about fictional temporality is significant for assessing the amenability of postmodernist fiction to representations of fetishism as historical practice. This significance is not derived from

any explicit identification which Ronen makes between the New Novel's experimentation and that of postmodern narrative (though it is clear she thinks of them in the same terms). Instead, her choice of the New Novel is important in light of her claim that ontological/temporal modes in fiction are distinguished by their actualization of events and entities. One of the most obvious ways in which Robbe-Grillet's work challenges conventional notions of time and temporality, as we have seen, is through its unique representation of the object. Moments in which, according to Barthes, Robbe-Grillet's narrative pauses in descriptive contemplation of a thing places that object at the center of what Ronen would call the text's *actualization* of the narrative present. To the extent that the New Novel refuses, in keeping with more traditional fictions, to allow seemingly unimportant objects to remain in the narrative background, it places the object at the center of time's unfolding (as Barthes argues). But in the process, it also locates the object, in keeping with Ronen's understanding of fictional time, at the juncture between *multiple worlds*.¹⁷ In effect Robbe-Grillet's object becomes a functional equivalent, if not a substitute, for words like "past" and "future" within the text, binding together the various ontological modalities to which these words refer.

But how does this relate to postmodernist fiction? The New Novel's unique strategies for actualizing the object reflect Ronen's claim that "[f]ictional ontology in general, the self-identity and the distinctness of fictional entities in particular, are [. . .] dictated by the literary school to which a text belongs, its style and rhetorical purposes" (140). For Ronen, that which chiefly distinguishes postmodernist fiction from previous literary movements is its assumption that the fictional world which it creates is

incomplete (140-41). Where a modernist or realist text always assumes the essential completeness of its fictional universe, postmodernist texts are defined by their foregrounding of the ontological *gaps* in the world(s) which they depict. McHale makes a similar point about the fictional object, as we have seen.¹⁸ Ronen, however, devotes much more attention to the techniques through which postmodern narratives actualize and *definitize* objects in a presumed incomplete fictional world.¹⁹ Modernist or realist texts tend to introduce and definitize entities in their respective worlds as if they are already known to the reader, since the completeness of the fictional universe corresponds to what the reader assumes of the actual one--in particular, that no truly “new” objects are possible in it. In postmodernist fiction, however, where the incompleteness of worlds is assumed, and where alternate realities periodically interact, definitization of objects is often brought about through rhetorical strategies that emphasize the *construction* of the objects in question. Ronen uses a passage from Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* to demonstrate this definitizing method:

But nothing is really itself anymore. There are pieces of this and pieces of that, but none of it fits together. And yet, very strangely, at the limit of all this chaos, everything begins to fuse again... At a certain point, things disintegrate into muck, or dust, or scraps, and what you have is something new, some particle or agglomeration of matter that cannot be identified.

(Auster 35, quoted in Ronen 139)

The significance of this definitizing tendency in relation to fetishism as a historical practice is evident if we recall that the affirmation of the “new” object as an index or link between multiple worlds characterizes the absorbed perspective on the fetish from as far back as the earliest first encounter narratives examined by Pietz. There, we might say that the fetish derives its magic (and its threat to Western historical models) from its

metaleptic status as the site at which one world penetrates another. What is suggested by Ronen's analysis is that objects within postmodern narrative have an inherently *metaleptic* potential, serving as points at which multiple worlds, and multiple times, come into contact. This renders postmodernist fiction especially conducive to a presentation of fetishism as historical practice because, at least in theory, the affirmation of an absorbed perspective on the fetish in this context requires only the actualizing of an object's latent *metaleptic* potential. Just as, for McHale, postmodernist fiction is distinguished by its emphasis on the ontological gaps that exist in all fictional objects, so, perhaps, fetishism as historical practice *within* postmodernist fiction can be distinguished by its emphasis on the *metaleptic* power of a single object that exists in all (postmodernist) fictional objects.

If this can be accepted as a general hypothesis, then I shall go one step further, and suggest that the foregrounding of the fetish's *metaleptic* status need not be established through the same degree of formal experimentation or ontological plurality found in Auster or Robbe-Grillet. Ann Beattie's frequently anthologized short story "Janus," for example, can be taken as a semi-realistic (or, more properly, neo-realistic) narrative about a common object which gains profound *metaleptic* and even magical properties. Though in formal terms hardly a challenge to readerly sensibilities in the manner of *La Maison de rendez-vous* or *In the Country of Last Things*, Beattie's story about a woman's growing obsession with a bowl nonetheless rhetorically foregrounds the kind of descriptive actualizing procedures suggestive of a shift toward affirming fetishism's historical potential.

Focalized through the perspective of Andrea, a real-estate agent, Beattie's story

details Andrea's growing conviction that her success at selling homes is due to her conspicuous placement of the same bowl in each house prior to showing it. This bowl, as the opening lines of the story suggest, is neither especially attractive nor valuable, yet possesses an unobtrusive charm: "The bowl was perfect. Perhaps it was not what you'd select if you faced a shelf of bowls, and not the sort of thing that would inevitably attract a lot of attention at a crafts fair, yet it had real presence" (105). As the story wears on, Andrea's good fortune gradually leads her to a kind of appreciative fixation on the bowl. Convinced that it is responsible for her professional success, Andrea's sales strategies become increasingly centered on the bowl and the rituals governing its display; meanwhile, the fear of its loss or breakage begins to awaken her at night. At one point she tries, without success, to deny the object's hold over her imagination: "The bowl was just a bowl. She did not believe that for one second" (110). At the end of the story, Andrea's divided attitude is portrayed ambiguously as a product of the bowl's history. Bought as a secret gift by a past lover who had pressured her, unsuccessfully, to leave her husband, the bowl is a remnant of a past in which Andrea had longed to "have it both ways" (112).

What makes this story interesting, beyond its subtle evocation of the psychoanalytic ties between fetishism and loss, is the way in which Beattie dramatizes the bowl's growing magic through a transformation of its status as a metaleptic object. At the beginning of the story, the bowl's usefulness stems from its ability to lend atmosphere to an otherwise empty house, in the same manner as a fire in the fireplace or a vase of flowers. But soon the object begins to attract the attention of prospective house-

buyers on its own:

They might notice the height of the ceiling on first entering a room, and only when their eye moved down from that, or away from the refraction of sunlight on a pale wall, would they see the bowl. Then they would go immediately to it and comment. Yet they always faltered when they tried to say something. Perhaps it was because they were in the house for a serious reason, not to notice some object. (106)

At this point an inversion takes place. Originally noted for its paradoxical ability--“both subtle and noticeable” (106)--to fit into and yet liven up any domestic space, the bowl is now distinguished by its power to catch a buyer’s eye as an object mysteriously *out of place* in the context of purchasing a home. As Andrea’s sales begin to increase, she takes the bowl’s pseudo-metaleptic power as a boon, becoming sure that “the bowl brought her luck” (107). Gradually, though, her own world begins to shrink around her. Afraid of betraying the secret of her success, she finds herself speaking less and less to her husband, and before long she cannot imagine any future without the bowl: “She did not think beyond that--to what her life would be without the bowl” (111). Not insignificantly, it is only when Andrea’s love for the object becomes tinged with fear and anxiety that its histories are revealed. First, Andrea tries to deny the bowl’s power by recalling how that power was discovered. She thinks back to her first uses of the bowl, when it was just another item in that “world full of tricks” (111) assembled for the purpose of selling homes. When this fails to dispel the magic, then the bowl’s history as a secret gift is revealed; but that history, too, fails to diminish or even fully explain the object’s power. Just as it constrains Andrea’s visions of the future, so too does the bowl preclude any hermeneutic attempt to justify its magic through recourse to the past. By the last paragraph of the story, the bowl has transcended the histories projected onto it

and become a world in itself:

Time passed. Alone in the living room at night, she often looked at the bowl sitting on the table, still and safe, unilluminated. In its way, it was perfect: the world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty. Near the rim, even in dim light, the eye moved toward one small flash of blue, a vanishing point on the horizon. (112)

Beattie's story documents the transformation of a utilitarian object into a fetish by foregrounding and then literalizing the object's metaleptic status.

A similar procedure is evident in the more recent short story "A Real Doll" by A. M. Homes. Here events are told from the perspective of a teen-aged boy who is "dating" his sister's Barbie doll. Aside from the dark wit with which the story addresses male/female sexual relations, and their learned cultural dynamics, it is especially interesting for the tension it establishes between the narrator's perspective and that of his pre-pubescent sister, Jennifer. Engaged in what he calls "practising for the future" (151), the narrator's behaviour toward Barbie oscillates between nervous solicitation and sexual abuse--a contradictory attitude mirrored in Jennifer's sometimes destructive treatment of her beloved doll. These perspectives intersect on the body of Barbie, which, though capable of movement and speech, continually affirms its inanimacy through the modifications--chewed feet, decapitation, sawed-off breasts--which it undergoes at Jennifer's hands. For the reader, trapped in the first-person perspective of the boy, Barbie's rational discussion of her own mutilation (she casually explains her missing breasts as a "reduction") only heightens her undecidable ontological status as real/fantasy, doll/woman. Fittingly, this ontological "flickering" is foreshadowed in the narrator's portrayal of Barbie, during their first date, as a world in herself:

I looked at her. Barbie's eyes were sparkling blue like the ocean on a good day. I looked and in a moment noticed she had the whole world, the cosmos, drawn in makeup above and below her eyes. An entire galaxy, clouds, stars, a sun, the sea, painted onto her face. Yellow, blue, pink, and a million silver sparkles. (152-53)

That it is Barbie's makeup that first signals her otherworldly presence is appropriate in light of Homes's less-than-subtle commentary on gender roles, and in view of the more extreme body-markings that Barbie will later display. The passage is also, however, a rhetorical signalling of Barbie's metaleptic status as a fetish binding together the story's numerous worlds: adolescence and adulthood, fantasy and reality, present and future, male and female.

By offering the examples of Beattie and Homes, I am not suggesting that an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a historical practice need necessarily foreground the metaleptic or historical potential of the object in this way. Nor, for that matter, should *object* be taken to connote only inanimate things. As the Homes story makes clear (and as we shall see in the discussion of Pynchon in the next chapter), postmodernist fiction pushes to an extreme the fetish's ability to challenge subject/object distinctions in a variety of ways, with often surprising results. Indeed, each of the authors analyzed in the next three chapters portrays the relationship between fetishism and history differently, and each offers unique commentary on the fetish as an index of multiple worlds or realities. Kathy Acker, for example, views fetishism and its relationship to history in the context of women's exclusion from representation by psychoanalytic models. Her use of female fetishism as a historical and political strategy consists in strategically rewriting and overwriting Freudian and Lacanian theory so as to construct, from within those

models, a myth and a world “beyond the phallus.” For Robert Coover, on the other hand, the fetish attains potency as an instrument of temporal ordering through its function in S/M rituals. *Spanking the Maid* is a commentary on the inevitable violence done to desire and temporality when bound by the “magic circle” of narrative--a violence in which the fetish, even accorded its historical ordering power, is necessarily implicated. Thus no two authors construct the fetish’s historical power in the same way, and none do so without at least some degree of misgiving. In this regard, perhaps one point that Beattie’s and Homes’s stories do succeed in establishing as a general principle for the analyses which follow is that affirmation of fetishism as a historical practice does not necessarily mean unqualified political or moral *endorsement* of that practice.

Viewed through the work of Ermarth, Gibson, and especially Ronen, the New Novel’s “assassination of the object” provides a rough framework for examining representations of objects in postmodern narrative which, as Beattie’s and Homes’s stories demonstrate, is extremely useful for charting the elaboration of fetishism as a historical practice. That the development of this framework necessitates the assumption of a continuity between the *nouveau roman* and postmodernist fiction is, I think, not overly problematic--especially since there is no need to claim the New Novel as postmodern *in toto*, and because the critical tools which it provides are readily adapted to a wide range of texts. If the liberation of an absorbed perspective on fetishism as a historical practice can be characterized, as I have suggested in Part One of this study, through a descriptive shift of perspective on the fetish, then postmodernist fiction, via its ties to the New Novel, appears readily capable of dramatizing such a shift.

From Theory to Practice

I have limited my efforts in this chapter to developing only the broadest formal characteristics through which a “fetishist poetics” of postmodernist fiction might be defined. My aim has been to show why--beyond the historical concomitance of postmodernist fiction and fetish theory--it is appropriate to look for fetishism as a historical practice within postmodernist fiction. I have no wish to try to assess the political impact of such fetishistic or historical practice in general terms. If this decision to leave the concept of practice deliberately vague proves disappointing to the theoretical-minded, I hope, at least, that it is not surprising. After all, were fetishism as a historical practice entirely determinable in theory, there would be no reason, and no justification, for my pursuit of such practice in individual fictional narratives. This is not to deny that fetishism lends itself to treatment by prominent theories of practice, particularly in the Marxist tradition of thought. Nor is it simply to ignore the fact that postmodernist fiction has often been criticized from within this same tradition for its lack of political praxis or commitment.²⁰ But my goal is not to justify postmodernist fiction’s worthiness as a literary form through its documentation of political effects prescribed in advance. Instead, the next three chapters of this study are concerned with elucidating the way in which various postmodern American authors and texts have used fetishism as a means of constructing histories, and what those histories mean in the specific political contexts established by each text.

The specificity of these contexts likewise grounds my refusal to treat the historical strategies employed by Pynchon, Acker, Coover, Hawkes, and DeLillo as indicative of a

single formal or theoretical methodology for revealing fetishism's historical ordering power. Instead, in the chapters which follow, I have attempted to allow each fictional narrative to dictate the particular theoretical tools best suited to analyzing its presentation of fetishism and history. As we shall see, however, each text's voice on the subject of fetishism is not equally pointed or insistent. Acker's *My Mother: Demonology* poses a direct challenge to psychoanalytic theory through a rewriting of Freud's theory of fetishism; by contrast, DeLillo's *Underworld* avoids direct mention of fetishism but organizes itself around the historical movement of a fantastic commodity-body; and Pynchon's *V.* posits numerous hypotheses about fetishism which, I suggest, both foreground and ironize the connections made in the novel between historical progress and gender difference. Chapters Four and Five are organized so as to reflect the common theoretical debates in which the paired authors are engaged; but again, this does not imply shared political motivations or conclusions on their part. Predictably, Acker and Pynchon do not construct their models of female fetishism in the same formal or political terms, although both are united in their use and revision of psychoanalytic models. Coover's *Spanking the Maid* and Hawkes's *Travesty* are both "minimalist" postmodern novels, both highly metafictional, and both organized at least in part around S/M practices; yet they come to very different conclusions about the historical potential of those practices. And Chapter Six, which focuses on DeLillo alone, suggests an evolution in his treatment of the cultural object whose culmination is found in his "maximalist" novel *Underworld*, the text which elaborates most clearly of all the concept of fetishism as a historical practice.

In analyzing these authors and texts, I attempt to apply theory in such a way that it opens up new readings of the texts in question, while also pointing out how the fictions themselves contribute to and further the theoretical debates in which I situate them. Receptivity to this (hopefully productive) analytical procedure has, above all, determined my choice of authors and texts. That this choice has led to the inclusion of two highly metafictional novels goes to show, I believe, that the rejection (by Hutcheon, Francese, and others) of the more ludic postmodernists on grounds of insufficient political or historical content is unwarranted. As I show in Chapter Five, even a novel like Hawkes's *Travesty*, which could stand as an advertisement of the brooding, self-reflexive postmodern novel, still admits of politically "oppositional" readings. On the other hand, Pynchon, Acker, and DeLillo are all authors whose work has occasionally been criticized for its too-thorough absorption of, and conformity with, contemporary theory. It is for just such a reason that, as I intend to show, they are prime candidates for documenting the historical potential of fetishism.

Notes

1. I list some of these “ontological” constructions of postmodern culture at the end of Chapter Two.
2. For a list of critics prior to McHale who describe postmodernist fiction in terms of its “backgrounding of epistemology,” see McHale, *Postmodernist* 11, note 22. For a list of critics who have examined the ontological orientation of postmodernist fiction, see Madsen 21, note 29.
3. McHale’s argument is most convincing when it focuses on the general formal and rhetorical strategies associated with an ontological dominant in fiction. His analyses of individual authors, with which he begins his book, are very brief and somewhat arbitrary in their identification of the switch-point between modernist and postmodernist poetics. The discussion of Coover, for example, pinpoints a turn toward postmodernism at the end of *The Universal Baseball Association Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968). This proves problematic, however, when McHale identifies as Coover’s next fully postmodernist work the short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), which includes many pieces published prior to *J. Henry Waugh* (*Postmodernist* 19-20). Even more problematic is the treatment of Pynchon’s *oeuvre*, which, according to McHale, does not exhibit a postmodernist “breakthrough” until *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). McHale’s definition of *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) as essentially late modernist novels flies in the face of most Pynchon criticism. Furthermore, by portraying *Lot 49* as closer to postmodernism than *V.*, McHale seems to privilege the notion of linear artistic development over his own diagnosis of the essential features of modernist texts (*Postmodernist* 21-25). Focalized through a single center of consciousness, *The Crying of Lot 49* bears more formal likeness to the paradigmatic models of modernism than does the fragmented and polyvocal *V.* Pynchon, for one, appears ready to admit that *Lot 49* was a step backward from the formal complexity and success of *V.*: “The next story I wrote was ‘The Crying of Lot 49,’ which was marketed as a ‘novel,’ and in which I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I’d learned up till then” (Introduction 22).
4. Reviewing contemporary debates about the distinction between fiction and history, Larry Langford characterizes the relationship between them as follows:

[T]he deconstruction of fiction and history acknowledges two essential points. The first is that their legitimacy as modes of discourse requires their unambiguous distinction from one another. The second is that this distinction cannot be maintained. This failure in no way deligitimizes either but leaves us suspended between the two, understanding that while each requires a separate identity, each functions as an integral part of the other. The differentiation of fiction from history provides the foundation for our conceptions of morality, epistemology, and communal identity, but the basis for that differentiation itself remains unavoidably ill-defined, an ambiguity which has been at the center of literary theory since the time of

Plato. (17)

5. Hutcheon calls the non-fiction novel “another late modernist creation,” and distinguishes between it and the New Journalism only on the basis of authorial participation in the events described (117). Cyberpunk goes unmentioned in her book. To be fair, McHale does not give any substantive treatment to cyberpunk in his first outing, *Postmodernist Fiction*, but remedies this omission with a chapter in his subsequent study, *Constructing Postmodernism*.
6. I discuss Ricoeur’s concept of the historical trace briefly in Chapter One. LaCapra’s model revises White’s early assumption (in *Metahistory*) of a neutral historical archive grounding the tropological choices open to historians when writing their narratives. For a more comprehensive summary of LaCapra’s model than is provided in Hutcheon 122, see Juan-Navarro 52-53.
7. Charles Newman, for one, complains that postmodernist fiction has annexed the previously external space of criticism to within itself. This brings about a hierarchical shift of cultural privilege, such that the critic, once subordinate to the artist, takes on the writer’s cast-off role as “cultural desperado” (119-21).
8. Hutcheon establishes numerous tentative, and somewhat uneasy, links between postmodernism and feminism which are more fully developed in her next book, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). McHale claims that postmodernist fiction, by virtue of its heterogeneous make-up, is mimetic of contemporary reality at the level of form rather than content (*Postmodernist* 38). For a much more detailed study of mimesis in postmodernist fiction, see Jerry Varsava’s *Contingent Meanings: Postmodern Fiction, Mimesis, and the Reader*. Varsava argues that mimesis is a “readerly problem” rather than one of authorial responsibility, and defines as *significantly* mimetic those works which, like postmodern narratives, enable the reader “to realize a *performative* (rather than *reconstructive*) mode of interpretation” (55). For an earlier treatment of mimeticism in postmodernist fiction which likewise focuses on reader response, see D’Haen (1987).
9. Hutcheon engages with these earlier readings--which include contributions from Jerome Klinkowitz, Gerald Graff, Charles Newman, and Terry Eagleton--in chapter three of her *Poetics*. For an alternative response to these critical models, see Varsava (1990) chapters one and two.
10. Francese dismisses ludic “modernists” like John Barth and Italo Calvino in language which recalls Hutcheon’s comments (already quoted) on surfiction and the New Novel: “The world is not questioned by metafiction, but enjoyed just as it is” (Francese 158). To his credit, Francese offers a fuller justification for his claim than does Hutcheon (48-58); but the problem with labelling Barth and similar writers as modernist remains, I think, unresolved. Juan-Navarro, reading Hutcheon, articulates only one of several conceivable objections: “Although not primarily concerned with history, these [ludic] writers could hardly be identified with a cultural project (modernism) they systematically parody and

question" (33).

11. The concept of ontological gaps in fictional objects is derived from Ingarden's idea that the world of fiction is polyphonic rather than ontologically unified. Whereas real-world objects are ontologically whole, and admit of only epistemological indeterminacies, fictional-world objects always have both ontological and epistemological gaps (McHale, *Postmodernist* 31).

12. As we have seen, Hutcheon dismisses the *nouveau roman* because it does not sufficiently question modes of (historical) representation (*Poetics* 40). And though, in McHale's theory, Robbe-Grillet is portrayed as an author whose work demonstrates the postmodern turn, that turn does not occur until *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965). The earlier *La Jalousie*, despite the "obsessive precision with which it specifies the spatial disposition of objects" (*Postmodernist* 15), is labelled modernist by McHale. Jameson, by contrast, considers the *nouveau roman* "and its succession" an important feature of literary postmodernism, in the same vein as the work of William Burroughs, Pynchon, or Ishmael Reed (*Postmodernism* 1). Ermarth also sees Robbe-Grillet as a key figure in postmodernist fiction, for both his novels and his theories. Of his collected essays, *For a New Novel*, she writes: "This collection remains the best single theoretical explanation of postmodern narrative" (68, note 59). She also presents *La Jalousie* as the text which best emphasizes her concept of postmodern time (72-84).

13. I confine my analysis to this article. Barthes wrote three subsequent essays on Robbe-Grillet, all of which (including "Objective Literature") are available in translation in his *Critical Essays*. The later essays are "Literal Literature," "There Is No Robbe-Grillet School," and "The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?"

14. This is not, of course, to suggest that Robbe-Grillet's work always puts into practice what he expounds in theory--a much-debated issue among critics of the New Novel. For an introduction to this debate, see chapter one of Morrisette, and Barthes' Foreword to Morrisette's book.

15. Ermarth goes on to state, in agreement with Robbe-Grillet, that the New Novel is actually "more realistic than the old realism" (88). Here she refers to the thesis of another of Robbe-Grillet's mid-50s essays, "From Realism to Reality."

16. Ronen characterizes this relaxation in terms of a shift from early twentieth century *correspondence* theories of truth (Bertrand Russell is the touchstone here) toward more recent *pragmatic* theories of the kind espoused by Richard Rorty.

17. For an earlier account of the object's role as an imaginative link between possible worlds, see Maitre 23-25. Maitre argues that, when faced with the task of identifying a new or unknown object, we imaginatively "fill out" a possible context for it, surrounding it with similar objects and images until its identity is made clear. This process of possible world-building generally continues only until the object is identified, although, as Maitre points out, it need not necessarily end at this point. In the case of the fetish object, it is

reasonable to suggest that the uniqueness of the fetish requires an ongoing process of contextual world-building for the fetishist, leading to an acknowledgement that no single imagined world is capable of fixing the fetish's identity or presence.

18. Ronen is in fundamental agreement with McHale's definition of postmodernist fiction, and his characterization of the ontological dominant. But as she acknowledges, she differs from other possible worlds theorists (and, by extension, from McHale) in restricting the assumption of an incomplete fictional world to postmodernist texts. She mentions only Pavel as a counterpart here (Ronen 140, note 2); but, more recently, Dolezel has also maintained that *all* fictional worlds are incomplete (22).

19. A word on the distinction between actualization and definitization is in order here. *Actualization*, for Ronen, denotes any of the various ways in which a text selects the scenes, events, and entities that will receive treatment in the narrative present of a text. *Definitization* is a more specialized concept, and pertains to the strategies by which fictional texts denote or construct objects and entities as "definite, well-individuated constituents" of their worlds (138). Definitization can thus be viewed as a sub-category of actualization, and Robbe-Grillet's descriptive actualizations of his objects in the narrative present are also examples of especially meticulous definitization.

20. Foremost among theories of practice that have an obvious bearing on fetishism are probably those of Althusser and Bourdieu. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser distinguishes practice from *praxis* on the basis that the meaning of the former cannot be determined through reference to subjective intention. Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* further supports the idea that practice does not depend upon a whole or conscious subject. For a detailed reading of Althusser's theory, see Mohanty 81-85. For Leftist and specifically Marxist criticism of postmodernist fiction, see Hutcheon, *Poetics* 210-17, and Varsava 68-77.

CHAPTER FOUR
FICTIONS OF THE FEMALE FETISH:
PYNCHON AND ACKER

*Freud thinks the foot may be a substitute for the penis,
but I am here to tell him that the penis
is no substitute for the foot.*

--Geoff Nicholson, *Footsucker*

Debates about female fetishism have been going on for almost two decades now. This fact alone would make efforts to define the female fetish a logical starting point for analyzing the potential of fetishism as a historical practice. Sarah Kofman's suggestion, in the early 1980s, that a Derridean reading of Freud's 1927 essay could not preclude the possibility of female fetishism, can be taken as the first attempt to construct an affirmative or absorbed perspective on the practice.¹ Preceding even Pietz's anthropological work on the history of fetishism as a philosophical concept, Kofman's provocative question, "Why is it so bad to be a fetishist?" signals in many ways the emergence of fetishism as a postmodernist discourse in its own right.²

Yet discussions of the female fetish are pertinent to an examination of fetishism's historical potential for other reasons as well. Because most efforts to define female fetishism pose a direct threat to the psychoanalytic privileging of the phallus in desire, these efforts tend to endow their historical revision of psychoanalytic theory with strong political significance. Although, as we shall see, there is still no consensus about the value of claiming female fetishism for feminist politics, these theories are, by virtue of their attempts even to make this strategic "claim," inherently affirmative in their approach to fetishistic practices. In addition--and particularly important in the present context--the most prominent theorists of female fetishism have all turned toward fiction for support of

their theoretical conclusions. Crucial contributions by Naomi Schor, Emily Apter, and Teresa de Lauretis have relied on fictional narratives to provide evidence of female “perversion” denied by psychoanalytic models.³

That said, it must also be acknowledged that proponents of female fetishism have remained, for the most part, satisfied with restricting the historical revisionary potential of their theories to within psychoanalytic paradigms, even while speculating on broader political consequences. While critics such as Schor, Apter and Matlock all draw attention to the historical evidence of female sexual perversity elided from psychoanalytic theory, they rarely address fetishism’s power to challenge dominant models of history. This is understandable, of course, given the political uncertainty that always seems to attend theorizing about the female fetish. Nevertheless, the fact that much of the historical evidence offered by these theorists is found in *fictional* narratives (or in narratives which walk a thin line between fiction and case study) points up a symptomatic weakening of the boundary between history and fiction where absorbed perspectives on the fetish are concerned. Reliance on fiction implies that female fetishism’s challenge to the relationship between castration and fetishism, as posited by psychoanalysis, is also a challenge to the economy which separates real from phantasmatic histories.

But what, specifically, is the nature of female fetishism’s challenge to psychoanalytic models? To sum it up briefly, the project to define the female fetish finds its chief target in Freud’s *de facto* exclusion of women from the practice of fetishism. As we have seen in Chapter One, the fetish, in Freud’s definition, is constructed in the young boy’s effort to disavow his mother’s castration, and to replace her “missing” penis. In

this role it functions as a “token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (“Fetishism” 154). Efforts to theorize female fetishism have therefore targeted Freud’s close connection between fetishism and castration anxiety as the obstacle to including women in perverse practices. But there has been little agreement on how to reclaim fetishistic loss for feminist politics. Sarah Kofman’s ground-breaking work locates its possibility of female fetishism in what Derrida sees as the fetish’s “power of excess in relation to the opposition” (*Glas* 211). For Kofman, the double-column structure of *Glas* itself is a textualization of a “diabolical double sex” which oscillates between feminine and masculine poles, casting each erection as an “originary supplement” not dependent on or preceded by castration (“Ça Cloche” 128-29).

Kofman’s affirmation of textual/sexual undecidability has been criticized from several angles. Naomi Schor’s reading of “bisexuality” in George Sand is not nearly as optimistic about female fetishism’s escape from the clutches of castration. Schor’s article ends by transforming the notion of Kofmanian undecidability into a somewhat pessimistic *political* oscillation. According to Schor, female fetishism may enable a model for structuring the aporias in feminist claims for equality *and* difference, or it may be, after all, only the “latest and most subtle form of penis envy” (“Female” 371).⁴ This issue is also taken up by Elizabeth Grosz, who erodes the difference between theory and practice by arguing that, like the fetishist, she wants to have female fetishism “both ways” (102). That is, while Grosz agrees with the psychoanalytic prohibition of women from fetishistic practices, she nonetheless maintains that female homosexuality can be considered a form of fetishism. Grosz’s discussion of lesbian fetishism does not deny the

relationship of fetishism to female lack, but claims fetishism for the masculine woman through the disavowal of her own (rather than her mother's) castration.

Meanwhile, Emily Apter has criticized Kofman for translating fetishism from a sexual into a purely textual phenomenon, abolishing the notion of sexual difference altogether (*Feminizing* 110). Striving to feminize the fetish by preserving sexual difference, Apter sees in articles such as clothes and post-partum object-traces an "erotic economy of severance and disappropriation, itself less fixed on a fiction of castration anxiety" (121). In the recent history of theorizing female perversity, Apter's conception of female fetishism does more than any other to erase the symbolic dependence of the fetish on castration; but her suggestion that nearly any form of female loss can be considered fetishism has come under attacks of its own. Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen criticize Apter's failure to maintain adequate distinction between sexual and anthropological fetishism (199). Gamman and Makinen, however, certainly defy conventional disciplinary boundaries when they define bulimia as a form of *sexual* fetishism for women. More pointedly, Teresa de Lauretis accuses Apter of a reductive generalization that preserves *gender* difference at the expense of fetishism's *sexual* dimension (274-75). In order to maintain the sexual focus, de Lauretis recuperates the notions of castration and the phallus in her reading of lesbian fetishism. Through a rearrangement of the symbolic order, the fetish becomes the signifier of perverse lesbian desire in which the lost object, for the "mannish" lesbian, is the female body itself. By theorizing the lesbian's experience of the female body as a phantasmatic object, de Lauretis brings the site of loss full circle from Freud's narrative, in which the biological

female body is the insurmountable bedrock of factual reality.⁵

Reviewing the history of this debate, E. L. McCallum suggests that the political impasse reached over the value of fetishism's paradigmatic indeterminacy for feminist politics has arisen, in fact, through the effort to define an exclusively *female* fetishism. According to McCallum, a careful reading of Freud on the subject reveals that, "The very usefulness of fetishism as a strategy lies with how it (potentially productively) undermines the rigid matrix of binary sexual difference through indeterminacy [. . .]. To then reinscribe fetishism within that same matrix--defining a male or female fetishism--undercuts fetishism's strategic effectiveness" (72-73). McCallum's advocacy of a sympathetic return to Freud might appear a rather ironic solution to problems about defining female fetishism, given that a recognized need to revise Freudian theory has been one of the few points of agreement in these debates. Yet a strategic rereading of Freud is also, as McCallum demonstrates, a means of reassessing not only the relationship between fetishism and castration, but also the temporal movement that obtains within that relationship. Although, as I argued in Chapter Two, McCallum does not push her own reading to its most radical conclusions, her work paves the way for reintroducing the temporal and narrative features of Freud's theory into discussions of the female fetish.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine the work of two postmodernist authors who emphasize the historical potential of female fetishism through similar strategic "returns" to Freud. Thomas Pynchon and Kathy Acker both negotiate the problem of rereading and rewriting Freudian theory so as to affirm the possibility of a

female fetish. In his first novel, *V.*, Pynchon ironizes and parodies psychoanalytic theory through the dramatization of lesbian fantasy and sexuality, in which female fetishism plays an important, but ambiguous, role. Acker's theorizing about a Freudian female fetishism in *My Mother: Demonology* brings the complex and contestatory engagement with psychoanalysis that informs all of her work to a politically suggestive head. Although, as we shall see, both authors come to different conclusions about the revisionary potential of female fetishism, their fictional contributions to debates about the female fetish foreground aspects of historical and political interest backgrounded in, or ignored by, previous theoretical accounts.

Re-Stenciling Lesbian Fetishism in Pynchon's *V.*

Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, is an important text for anyone interested in attempts to theorize female fetishism. "V. in Love," the last overtly "Stencilized" of the novel's historical chapters, tells the story of the abortive love affair between a fifteen-year-old dancer, Mélanie, and a mysterious patroness identified only as the lady V. Viewed through the perspectives of the members of Mélanie's theatre circle, this relationship is the object of numerous pseudo-Freudian speculations connecting fetishism, narcissism, and lesbian desire. Eventually, these speculations are mirrored both in the musings of the story's ambiguous author, Herbert Stencil, and in the commentary of the unnamed narrator who appears to supersede Stencil's authorial role in the final third of "V. in Love." By the end of the chapter, which depicts Mélanie's death by impalement on the night of her premiere, the relationship between the young dancer

and V. has been implicated in a grand conspiracy between lesbianism, fetishism, and death:

If V. suspected her fetishism at all to be part of any conspiracy leveled against the animate world, any sudden establishment here of a colony of the Kingdom of Death, then this might justify the opinion held in the Rusty Spoon that Stencil was seeking in her his own identity. But such was her rapture at Mélanie's having sought and found her own identity in her and in the mirror's soulless gleam that she continued unaware, off-balanced by love; forgetting even that [. . .] their love was in its way only another version of tourism; for as tourists bring in to the world as it has evolved part of another, and eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city, so the Kingdom of Death is served by fetish-constructions like V.'s, which represent a kind of infiltration. (411)

This provisional explanation of the chapter's events has received convincing, and contrary, interpretation from critics operating within different veins of poststructuralist thought. Hanjo Berressem accepts the authority of this passage and treats it as support for his argument that Pynchon's novel "fictionalizes Baudrillard's vision of a fully simulated subject" (53).⁶ According to Berressem, "V. in Love" is a nightmarish dramatization of Baudrillard's history of the body, whereby the semiotic progress of the fetish's "staged castration" is revealed in the reduction of the woman to a mannequin, or a pure signified of sexuality (*Pynchon's* 58). Alec McHoul and David Wills, on the other hand, reject the historical progression implied in the narrator's commentary, relying on a Derridean understanding of the fetish as a deconstruction of natural origins, "a supplement, both replacing and adding to" (182). By their reading, the discourse on fetishism in "V. in Love" precludes any attempt to pinpoint V. as a stable term in a male/female binary. I want to suggest, however, that what both of these interpretations miss--either by preserving the psychoanalytic focus on fetishism as an exclusively male perversion, as

does Berressem, or by neutralizing the gendered perspective on fetishism entirely, as do McHoul and Wills--is the challenge which Pynchon's portrayal of lesbian fetishism poses to the psychoanalytic prohibition of women from fetishistic practices. Published in 1963, *V.* anticipates by nearly twenty years the theoretical project to define the female fetish. Furthermore, by presenting the story of V.'s lesbian relationship within the framework of Stencil's historical "soul transvestism," Pynchon implicates female fetishism, and Stencil's disavowal of that practice, in the novel's broader attacks on totalizing, linear historical models.

The individual chapters of Pynchon's novel can be roughly organized into two categories, based on their historical focus. In one group are those chapters depicting events in the novel's present, circa 1956. These chapters focus on the wanderings of a dissolute group of artists and reactionaries called the Whole Sick Crew, whose star member is Benny Profane, a self-proclaimed *schlemihl* at war with a world of inanimate objects. In Benny's view, "love for an object" (23) in any form--whether his girlfriend's passion for her car, or his past employer's love for his gun--signifies the conspiratorial encroachment of inanimacy on animate (human) life. This problem leads Benny to articulate a revolutionary theory of history, in which animate subjects reassert, through sex, their mastery over the inanimate: "history unfolds according to economic forces and the only reason anybody wants to get rich is so he can get laid steadily, with whomever he chooses. [. . .] Inanimate money was to get animate warmth, dead fingernails in the living shoulderblades, quick cries against the pillow, tangled hair, lidded eyes, twisting loins. . ." (214, ellipses Pynchon's). Either because he is unable to hold down a job (and

is thus largely excluded from the play of history's "economic forces"), or because he tends to view women as already contaminated by inanimacy, Benny's own sexual encounters, far from granting him the mastery he seeks, only reinforce his status as a "victim" of modern history.

Into another category can be grouped all of the novel's remaining chapters, which document events out of the historical past, often focalized through a second protagonist, Herbert Stencil. It is Stencil who is engaged in the central epistemological quest of the novel, the search for the identity of V. The novel's historical chapters are presented, at least initially, as Stencil's narrative speculations--mostly "impersonation and dream" (63)--on V.'s wide-ranging historical influences and activities. As such, these chapters are complete stories in and of themselves⁷; yet taken together, they suggest a larger continuity through the presence, in each, of a V.-persona embodying aspects of what Deborah Madsen calls a "V.-metaphysic," identified by the common themes of decadence, tourism, disguise, prosthesis, violence, and inanimacy (32). For example, Victoria Wren, appearing in two of the earliest Stencilized narratives, is first presented as an English tourist in Alexandria just prior to the Fashoda crisis of 1898, and is implicated in several lengthy expositions of Karl Baedeker's "perfectly arranged tourist-state" (71). She is next seen a year later in Florence, naked except for an ornate ivory comb, engaged in devout prayer and exhibiting a "nun-like temperament pushed to its most dangerous extreme" (167). Vera Meroving, in Capetown, 1922, has an artificial eye which doubles as a watch; in Valetta, 1943, the same eye is extracted along with a host of other prosthetic devices (one of which is Victoria's comb) from the body of a woman who,

disguised as a Catholic priest, preaches subversive doctrine to the local children of Malta. In Paris, 1913, a wealthy dress-maker known only as V. seduces a young ballet dancer, then flees the city when the girl is killed on stage during what is supposed to be a simulated genital impalement. And in the epilogue of the novel, which takes place in Valetta, 1919, the reader meets Veronica Manganese, who has an “obsession with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter” (488). Of all the defining traits of V., it is her interest in the prosthetic that is most pronounced, particularly because, given the elusive nature of her identity and her penchant for disguise, it is only through these object-clues that she becomes knowable to Stencil. Projecting himself backward in history through a process of “soul transvestism,” which enables him to inhabit the perspectives of those close to V., Stencil conducts a lifelong search in which the “traditional tools and attitudes” (62) of espionage take on an increasingly suspicious cast, indicating as much about Stencil’s own obsessions as about the object of his quest.

To argue that fetishism bears an important relation to history in Pynchon’s novel is thus, perhaps, not surprising. In some ways, Stencil’s search for V., and the fact that the V.-personas manifest more prostheses the later they appear in Stencil’s chronology, serve as confirmation of Benny’s theory about the usurpation of the animate world by the inanimate.⁸ On the other hand, to argue the relevance of Pynchon’s novel to debates about *female* fetishism might seem strange, given that V.’s brand of “love for an object” has often been interpreted as Pynchon’s condemnation of alternative female sexualities. Indeed, *V.* has not fared particularly well under feminist scrutiny. Mary Allen argues that the violent, sexually symbolic death of Mélanie at the end of “V. in Love” is evidence of

Pynchon's strong indictment of lesbianism (45). Alice Jardine describes V. as a "mother-fetish [. . .] not meant to be found, but only deconstructed into her component parts, never adding up to a whole" (252). And Catherine Stimpson, who acknowledges the presence of female fetishism in *V.*, argues that it is more sinister than the male variety because "Pynchon assigns women that normative task of acting out and symbolizing natural fertility" (37-38). Yet I want to suggest that, if Pynchon's presentation of lesbian sexuality and fetishism has been interpreted negatively by feminist critics, there is much in the novel to justify a re-evaluation. Mark Hawthorne's recent analysis of "gender-bending" in *V.*, which engages directly with Allen, Jardine, and Berressem, is one attempt to recontextualize Pynchon's portrayal of gender and sexuality in the cultural milieu of 1950s America. Where Hawthorne takes a wrong turn, however, is in rejecting psychoanalysis as irrelevant to Pynchon's depiction of sexuality and perversion.⁹ In doing so, he misses Berressem's central point, which is not that Pynchon's novel strictly adheres to psychoanalytic models, but rather that it invokes psychoanalysis only to subvert and challenge its relevance to a new cultural "scene."

Nevertheless, the problem I have with Berressem's reading is that, although it attends to Pynchon's subversive use of Freud, it backgrounds, and ultimately forgets, what seems to me the *most* challenging aspect of Pynchon's portrayal of fetishism: the depiction of women as active participants. As recent efforts to define female fetishism would suggest, the exclusion of women from the practice of fetishism is a far more notorious psychoanalytic constant than is Berressem's notion of a conventional inanimate fetish object. His description of the Freudian fetish as a substitute phallus formed from

“a material, inanimate object associated with women’s bodies” (59) is an oversimplification which conceals Freud’s repeated mention of fixations (feet, hair, and the nose, among others) that do not fall so clearly under the heading of the inanimate. As a result, Berressem’s reading deflects attention away from Pynchon’s attack on the one constant that unifies the definition of the fetish in Freud, Lacan, and Baudrillard: the phallic prototype.¹⁰

In what follows, I argue that “V. in Love” enters debates about female fetishism from two directions, corresponding roughly to the chapter’s two-part structure. The first part, beginning with Mélanie’s arrival in Paris, and ending shortly before her first conversation with V., serves as an implicit challenge to the psychoanalytic definition of the fetish as a substitute phallus. Initially, the chapter’s exclusively male perspective on the fetish--grounded in a narrative fixation on women’s clothing--appears to endorse a psychoanalytic model in keeping with the novel’s earlier presentation of what I call “profane” fetishism (because unspecialized, and focalized through the character of Benny Profane). As “V. in Love” progresses, however, female perspectives stage an attack on the word *fetish* itself, forcing it to bear the weight of affiliations which unsettle its strict relation to a phallic prototype. Ironically, this semantic shift can be diagnosed with reference to a lesser known Freudian account of female clothing fetishism, itself contradicted by Freud’s 1927 theory.

On a second level, part two of “V. in Love” hints at a complementary relationship between female fetishism and lesbian desire. In this it supports de Lauretis’s argument regarding the mannish lesbian, while foregrounding an issue undeveloped in her theory:

the significance of fetish items for *feminine*, as opposed to masculine, lesbian subjects. By constructing a loose framework of lesbian desire within which to view Mélanie's narcissistic fantasies, Pynchon's novel contributes to a theory of lesbian fetishism, and suggests how de Lauretis's theory might be extrapolated to account for the femme fetish. Toward the end of this section, I attempt such an extrapolation. My "re-Stenciling" of Mélanie's perverse desire, in keeping with the theoretical origins of female fetishism, takes root in the textual undecidability that characterizes the narration of V.'s descent, via lesbianism, into inanimacy and death. The close association which the text establishes between this supposedly objective description and Stencil's own dreams and ploddings problematizes any attribution of omniscience to the narrator who emerges in the latter portion of "V. in Love." The doubt thus cast on the "authoritative" interpretation of lesbianism and fetishism enables a counter-reading which affirms, rather than denies, the possibility of a distinctly female fetish, and thwarts any attempt to treat V. as an unquestioned real on which to elaborate phallogocentric models of historical truth.

Pynchon introduces the theme of fetishism in *V.* early on, through a combination of unstated referents and visual focalization. From the outset, the novel assumes the reader's familiarity with a popular conception of the fetish as one of a relatively limited series of sexualized feminine accoutrements. It is this assumed familiarity that enables the specific referent or referents of the word *fetish*, when first used in the novel, to remain tacit. Thus Esther, attempting to seduce her plastic surgeon, makes an appearance at his office "garbed underneath as lacily and with as many fetishes as she could afford" (109). Similarly, Rooney Winsome attributes to Paola Maijstral the "passive look of an object of

sadism, something to be attired in various inanimate costumes and fetishes” (221). The latter example foregrounds the extent to which Pynchon’s presentation of fetishism is in harmony, at least at first, with the psychoanalytic privileging of the male perspective in clothing fetishism. Women adorn their bodies--or allow them to be adorned--with supplementary fetishes so as to secure the notion of an essential femininity in the eyes of the male, in keeping with the Lacanian masquerade.¹¹ The text secures a space for the fetish’s phallic referent by positioning the reader to view commonly fetishized articles solely through the eyes of its male characters. And this phenomenon works in reverse, so that these articles, even when not labelled “fetishes,” become ripe targets for narrative fixation. Benny Profane’s encounter with Rachel Owlglass in the employment office provides an example:

Soon there came the hurried and sexy tap of high heels in the corridor outside. As if magnetized his head swiveled around and he saw coming in the door a tiny girl, lifted up to all of 5' 1" by her heels. Oboy, oboy, he thought: good stuff. [...] Smiling and waving hello to everyone in her country, she clickety-clacked gracefully over to her desk. He could hear the quiet brush of her thighs, kissing each other in the nylon. Oh, oh, he thought, look at what I seem to be getting again. Go down, you bastard.

(216)

The framing of visual and auditory detail in this passage exemplifies what Apter calls a “gendered scopic poetics” (*Feminizing* 32). Attention to Rachel’s shoes and stockings, at the expense of other descriptive information, places the reader in the position of voyeur and fetishist. This visual configuration of the fetish scene in accordance with the male scopic drive is central in most discussions of fetishism. Laura Mulvey’s influential reading of fetishism in film emphasizes how contemplation of the on-screen female reveals the projection of male fantasy even as it halts narrative movement (*Visual* 19).

And Whitney Davis argues that a fetishistic subjectivity, in Freudian terms, is “constituted as a doubled and reversed *Nachträglichkeit* of memory images as the embodiedness of vision itself” (93). Pynchon’s implicit reservation of fetishistic looking to men (and to Benny Profane in particular) is thus an important complement to his emphasis on the fetish as an article of women’s clothing. The term *fetish* is one which not only implies a certain sexualized set of objects, but also the viewing of those objects from a particular gendered perspective--that, specifically, of the male.

“V. in Love,” a supposedly true story told by Stencil to Benny,¹² appears at first to confirm and even amplify this gender bias. While registering Mélanie’s arrival in Paris and her first rehearsals for the ballet, Stencil’s narrative eye pays particular attention to the common fetish objects seen earlier in the novel, taking every opportunity to zone the female body for scopic enjoyment. A narrative preoccupation with shoes, lingerie, and especially stockings dominates descriptions of the female characters throughout the early part of the chapter. In just the first seven pages, there are eight separate references to skirts fluttering above stocking tops, dancers adjusting their stockings, and embroidery on women’s hosiery. Often these moments of erotic contemplation are focalized through male characters, as when Mélanie is introduced to the ballet’s choreographer, Satin: “She stood awkwardly on one leg, reached down and scratched her calf, hot under its black stocking. Satin watched hungrily” (396).

More than just an issue of descriptive focalization, however, references to stockings and lingerie crop up within the diegesis of “V. in Love.” Mélanie’s stage name, the reader soon discovers, is “Mlle. Jarretière.” And M. Itague, welcoming Mélanie to

the theatre, greets her with, “Come, *fétiche*, inside” (395). That Mélanie takes the French words for *garter* and *fetish* as her nicknames suggests that her identity is generic, consisting in nothing more than an assemblage of feminine clothes and accoutrements. Her alternate names push the Lacanian model of the female masquerade to an extreme, implying that she is hollowed out and, at the same time, filled up by her function of reflecting male desire, or “being” the phallus.

But Mélanie’s role as a depthless screen for the projection of male fantasy is complicated by her dreams and memories. Three of Mélanie’s internal reveries are presented in the first part of the chapter, each challenging in different ways her construction as an empty sign of male desire. The first is a recurring fantasy in which she imagines herself sliding down the roof of her ancestral home in Normandy, observed by her mother (395). The second is a kind of make-believe fashion show which she envisions putting on for her father (397-98). And the third, occurring just before the end of part one, is a dream in which Mélanie is transformed into a wind-up doll, receiving attention from a man who is both her father and a German engineer (401-02). I will return to the first and last of these fantasies later; for now, however, it is the second one which deserves attention for the way it unsettles the chapter’s previous gendered focalization of fetishism. Here is Mélanie dressing for the first time in her Su Feng costume:

Back in the hot room she quickly removed shoes and stockings, keeping her eyes closed tight until she had fastened her hair in back with the spangled amber comb. She was not pretty unless she wore something. The sight of her nude body repelled her. Until she had drawn on the blond silk tights, embroidered up each leg with a long, slender dragon; stepped into the slippers with the cut steel buckles, and intricate straps which

writhed up halfway to her knees. Nothing to restrain her breasts: she wrapped the underskirt tightly around her hips. It fastened with thirty hooks and eyes from waist to thigh-top, leaving a fur-trimmed slit so that she could dance. And finally, the kimono, translucent and dyed rainbowlike with sunbursts and concentric rings of cerise, amethyst, gold and jungly green. (397)

The absence of detail regarding Mélanie's naked body, and the lingering over sartorial specifics, align this passage with Benny's earlier leering at Rachel. But the vital difference is that now Mélanie herself is charged with the scopic prejudice that transfers attention from her body to her clothing. For Mélanie, the kimono, skirt, slippers, and tights occasion a narcissistic arousal which becomes evident when, dressed in her outfit, she lies on the bed and stares at herself in a ceiling mirror, enamoured by her own beauty.

By attributing this kind of fetishistic looking to Mélanie, "V. in Love" seems to challenge the notion, common to both profane and psychoanalytic conceptions of fetishism, that such speculation is unique to men. More than this, however, Mélanie's fixation on her own clothes recalls an early, and little-known, Freudian contribution to the problem of female fetishism. While discussing male clothing fetishism in an address to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1909, Freud makes this brief aside:

In the world of everyday experience, we can observe that half of humanity must be classed among the clothes fetishists. All women, that is, are clothes fetishists. Dress plays a puzzling role in them. It is a question again of the repression of the same drive, this time, however, in the passive form of allowing oneself to be seen, which is repressed by clothes, and on account of which, clothes are raised to a fetish. Only now we understand why even the most intelligent women behave defenselessly against the demands of fashion. For them, clothes take the place of parts of the body, and to wear the same clothes means only to be able to show what the others can show, means only that one can find in her everything that one can expect from women, an assurance which the woman can give only in this form. (155-56)

In the context of efforts to theorize female fetishism, the value of this passage has been a source of some disagreement.¹³ Yet regardless of its inherent value or consistency, the mere fact that Freud's sole admission of a female fetish presents it as a substitute for a *female* body part suggests that his 1927 theory is a deliberate effort to safeguard the centrality of the phallus in desire, which he knew very well was threatened by (his own understanding of) female fetishism. Melanie's fixation on her clothes indicates a fetishistic substitution that does not depend on--or at least does not depend *only* on--a phallic substitute.

This is not to say, however, that Melanie's fixated looking creates an absolute rupture between the fetish and the phallus. Rather, the threat to the phallic economy posed by her fetishistic speculation is diminished to the extent that her fetishism *also* implies--at one and the same time--an internalizing of the male perspective on her own body. Mélanie's belief that "she was not pretty unless she wore something" partakes of the classic male fetishistic view of the female body, where the fear of her real genitals remains, according to Freud, a "*stigma indelebile* of the repression that has taken place" ("Fetishism" 154). At most, Mélanie's fantasy sets in motion an oscillation between two interpretive approaches to her clothing fetishism: one that casts the fetish prototype as a portion of the female anatomy (in keeping with Freud's rejected theory), and one that maintains the phallic reference (as per Freud's 1927 essay).

This oscillation is taken up by the narrative itself. The two alternative explanations of Mélanie's perversity become embodied in "V. in Love" through two characters--one male and one female--who speculate on, and seek to decode the dynamics

of, her narcissistic desire. The first perspective is that of the ballet's impresario, M. Itague, a man whom we are told is well-versed in the "new science of the mind" (408). In a heated discussion with his friend, Satin, Itague offers a detailed interpretation of Mélanie's narcissism. By his reading, her love for self-adornment reflects her father's desire:

Have you seen the child's furs, her silks, the way she watches her own body? Heard the noblesse in the way she speaks? He gave her all that. Or was he giving it all to himself, by way of her? (399)

Itague's speculations resonate with Freud's 1927 theory, in which the man "gives" the woman the classically fetishized furs and silks in order to render her a desirable sexual object for himself. As in Freud, the particular details of this supplementation are not as significant as the *universal* female lack, perceived by all men, which is made tolerable by the fetish. Hence, for Itague, Mélanie "functions like a mirror" (395); "You, that waiter, the chiffonnier in the next empty street she turns into: whoever happens to be standing in front of the mirror in the place of that wretched man. You will see the reflection of a ghost" (399). That Itague's list of possible "reflections" is limited only to male figures also reveals his psychoanalytic knowledge, in that the fetish-display is configurable solely from a male perspective.

Yet at the same time, Mélanie is already becoming a source of interest to the lady V., whose cryptic comments on fetishism and femininity point to the instabilities and omissions in Itague's theory. While Itague focuses his attention on Mélanie's costumes, V. addresses the issue of Mélanie's metaphoric clothes, her names:

Do you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman. A shoe, a locket... une jarretière. You are

the same, not real but an object of pleasure. (404)

V.'s definition of the fetish as "something of a woman" recalls Freud's rejected theory of the female fetish; but it is more than just an oblique reference to that abandoned model. By using Mélanie's stage name, *jarretière*, to refer to a commonly fetishized object and to Mélanie herself, V. gives explicit voice to the idea that woman's identity is inseparable from the cultural masquerade of her femininity. At the same time, however, she enables us to see how a profane definition of the fetish can also prove a latent threat to the phallic prototype.

That threat resides in the dual coding of common fetishes, such as Melanie's stockings and high heels, as markers of both male desire *and* feminine otherness.

Berkeley Kaite discusses this dual coding in her analysis of mainstream pornography:

Although the fetish may be a masculine prerogative, and phallic in its properties, the pairing of the fetish with castration fears is questionable. That is, the marking of "woman" as different is a dual maneuver: on the one hand, the fetish preserves the fiction of "otherness." In that sense the fetish is like a mirror: the reader sees himself in the phallic death wish. But on the other hand, that otherness--the writing that signifies the feminine--is a partially phallic discourse which allows for a "delicate" difference, like the high-heel shoe the model sports: a precarious balance.
(95)

In a male speculative economy, the fetish, according to Kaite, serves as a "stand-in" for the "missing element," whether the phallus or the reader himself (94). In this manner, as Itague's interpretation suggests, the fetish enables Mélanie to function "like a mirror" (V. 395) for any male. But even while the fetish secures the organization of difference on the basis of having or not having the phallus, the cultural recognition of classically fetishized objects as signs of the feminine also threatens the exclusive role of the fetish within male

speculative fantasy. This is because, as Kaite points out, such objects also signal the absence or “death wish” of their phallic authors. The fact that the “writing that signifies the feminine” is also a “partially phallic discourse” implicates the fetish in the *denial* of difference, and precludes its dependence on any clear biological prototype.

In Pynchon’s novel, that death wish enters the text when Itague describes Mélanie, rather than her fetish objects, as a mirror. Yet it remains only a latent threat until V. uses the words *fetish* and *jarretière* interchangeably to foreground Mélanie’s status as an “object.” This deliberate conflation of terms breaks down the referential chain whereby a specific fetish, such as *une jarretière*, can serve as a placeholder maintaining the distinction between the fetish as a universal substitute for a *phantasmatic* phallus, and the female body as the site at which lack is universally perceived *in the real*.¹⁴ If Mélanie, as a fetish, is not a woman but “something of a woman,” then more important than her inclusion in a list of inanimate objects is the fact that *woman*, as one pole of a binary opposition, has gone missing. The implication of this for Freud’s 1927 theory of fetishism is that the phantasmatic phallus, as the fetish’s universal referent, loses its guarantee of a real, biological female lack to which it can oppose itself in establishing its psychic privilege. Instead, it now appears that the lost phantasmatic object is the biological female body itself. As a result, the male author reflected by this undecidable real/phantasmatic female body loses his privileged perspective. He becomes the “ghost” which Itague describes, forever oscillating between presence and absence, reality and fantasy.¹⁵

V.’s definition of the fetish therefore poses a challenge to the traditional

psychoanalytic understanding of fetishism by establishing, as did Freud in 1909, a substitutive relationship between the fetish and the female body. Yet there is an important difference between V.'s suggestion and that of Freud, for where Freud's admission of female fetishism posits the fetish as a replacement for a part of the real female anatomy, V. seems to imply a disavowal of a *phantasmatic* body or body-parts. The latter concept is ultimately more radical than Freud's theory because it goes further toward displacing fetishism from an exclusively male speculative framework. In Freud's account, women use the fetish to shield themselves from men's eyes and to signify "everything that one can expect from women," thereby preserving female lack as an unquestioned ground on which the fetish depends. V.'s definition, by contrast, threatens to eject the phallus from the fetish scene and to replace it with another form of psychic loss.

That this new site of loss might be configured from a uniquely female point of view is suggested in a highly charged scene that ends the first part of "V. in Love." After a Black Mass attended by members of the theatre crowd, Itague watches V.'s subtle erotic play with a young sculptress:

The lady was absorbed in burning tiny holes with the tip of her cigarette, through the skirt of the young girl. Itague watched as the pattern grew. She was writing *ma fétiche*, in black-rimmed holes. The sculptress wore no lingerie. So that when the lady finished the words would be spelled out by the young sheen of the girl's thighs. (403)

Here the two interpretive possibilities regarding Mélanie's narcissism, represented in the perspectives of Itague and V., finally come together in a reconfiguration of the fetish scene. For now it is the *woman* who quite literally writes her desire onto the girl. The

burned skirt serves as a stencil through which the new referent of the word *fetish* emerges in the sheen of the sculptress's body. But note that both the skirt and the flesh beneath are essential for this optical effect: the referent of *ma fétiche* is both the girl's body and the clothes which (partially) conceal it. Moreover, in a chapter which turns women's stockings into a motif, it is only through their *absence* that the word *fetish* becomes discernible in this new visual configuration. The referential link previously used to foreground the fetish's phallic aspect (the lingerie which could remain unspecified and yet understood in a profane definition of the fetish) is now literally absent. In this configuration, *fetish* is revealed as an optical phenomenon formed from an oscillation between the woman's fashion-embodiment, her clothes, and the biological body. Pynchon seems to be suggesting here that the fetishization of feminine artifacts as "objects of pleasure" opens onto new psychic terrain that enables the possibility of a distinctly female fetishism.

If the first part of "V. in Love" concludes by suggesting that V.'s writing and speculation, or Mélanie's narcissism, might be more than the mere internalizing of fetishistic male perspectives and desires, the second part of the chapter seems to both fortify and undermine that suggestion. On the one hand, the suspected lesbian relationship which evolves between V. and Mélanie in the chapter's second half is directly implicated in a new economy of visual speculation. V.'s redefining of the word *fetish*, and its impact on Itague's theorizing, is presented by the narrator as integral to understanding V.'s fetishistic relations with Mélanie: "Had they [the theatre circle] seen the skirt of the little sculptress from Vaugirard, heard the pet-name the woman had for

Mélanie, or read--as had Itague--in the new science of the mind, they would have known that certain fetishes never have to be touched or handled at all; only seen, for there to be complete fulfillment" (408). This interpretation appears, however, in the midst of a series of narrative interventions that extend Itague's pseudo-Freudian ponderings into a vast conspiracy. These hypotheses, posited by a narrator well-acquainted with Stencil's obsessions and fixations, actually halt the flow of the narrative, interrupting the story at a crucial moment during Mélanie's first visit to V.'s loft:

The bed was a great four-poster. Mélanie's wrap had fallen away: her legs, blond and bedragoned, lay unmoving half on the pouf, half on the oriental rug. The woman sat down beside the girl, resting her hand lightly on Mélanie's shoulder, and began to talk.

If we've not already guessed, "the woman" is, again, the lady V. of Stencil's mad time-search. No one knew her name in Paris.

Not only was she V., however, but also V. in love. Herbert Stencil was willing to let the key to his conspiracy have a few of the human passions. Lesbianism, we are prone to think in this Freudian period of history, stems from self-love projected on to some other human object. If a girl gets to feeling narcissist, she will sooner or later come upon the idea that women, the class she belongs to, are not so bad either. (407)

More than anything else, perhaps, it is the disruption of the narrative flow that lends authority to the narrator's interpretation of lesbianism and fetishism. Compared to the other Stencilized chapters in the novel, "V. in Love" is notable for the apparent objectivity of its narration up to this point.¹⁶ The voice that exposes and ironizes the chapter's descriptive coyness about V.'s identity recalls the reader's attention to Stencil's authorial role even as it takes over that role. Consequently, the new narrator derives authority from the ability to demystify the unobtrusiveness of Stencil's story-telling as, itself, testament to Stencil's lack of reliability. Expounded from a position seemingly untainted by any "soul transvestism," the lengthy theoretical bridge between Mélanie's

visit to V.'s loft, and her later death on stage, denies the possibility of female fetishism by equating its distinct psychic terrain with that of tourism and death:

The smallest realization [. . .] that she [V.] fitted into a larger scheme leading eventually to her personal destruction and she might have shied off, come to establish eventually so many controls over herself that she became--to Freudian, behaviorist, man of religion, no matter--a purely determined organism, an automaton, constructed, only quaintly, of human flesh. Or by contrast, might have reacted against the above [. . .] by journeying even deeper into fetish-country until she became entirely and in reality--not merely as a love-game with any *Mélanie*--an inanimate object of desire. (411)

This passage underpins Berressem's conclusion that, in *V.*, "Pynchon laments [. . .] the demise of the human and the advent of the dreamless machine" (75). But to accept this theorizing as Pynchon's final word on fetishism is not without problems. First, considering that Stencil refers to himself in the third person throughout the novel, the grounding of narrative authority in a voice that speaks of and about Stencil from an "external" vantage is inherently suspicious, especially in the context of a Stenciled chapter. Second, and more importantly, although the new narrator introduces the provisional explanation of V.'s fetishism as an index of what Stencil does not know (or reveal) about the story he tells, that explanation actually ends up dovetailing with Stencil's own knowledge and perspective. In the sentences that immediately follow the passage above, the narrator's description of V. concludes by deferring to Stencil's "daydream" about her as an automaton. Even more telling is the fact that the entire historical explanation of V.'s decadence ends with a return to the perspective of Stencil, who seems to have full knowledge of the theoretical and physical transitions described:

Love is love. It shows up in strange displacements. This poor woman was racked by it. Stencil however only shrugged. Let her be a lesbian, let her

turn to a fetish, let her die: she was a beast of venery and he had no tears for her. (412)

If the authority of the second narrator's voice depends on its standing beyond the reach of Stencil's obsessions, then the account given of V.'s historical progression into inanimacy is undermined by its close association with Stencil's "usual ploddings" (411).

Furthermore, to accept as definitive the theorizing which permeates the end of "V. in Love" is to neglect its power as a critical reflection on how psychoanalysis has, itself, disavowed historical narratives of female fetishism. According to Jann Matlock, virtually all of the major studies on perversion prior to 1908 included cases of fetishistic behaviour in women.¹⁷ Even discounting Freud's early admission of female fetishism, his 1927 essay must be read as a selective "screen memory" of previous discourses on sexual perversion. Similarly, the fact that Stencil's authorial presence is re-introduced and usurped at the moment when V. and Mélanie presumably consummate their love for one another allows one to hypothesize that the diegetic presentation of lesbianism is too traumatic for Stencil, as narrator, to relate. Rather than finish the story, Stencil *disavows* it through an elaborate theory of desire. In this light, the emergence of a second narrator who knows everything Stencil knows, yet seeks to distance himself from that perspective, can be taken as a representation of Freud's "splitting of the ego" in the process of disavowal.

This shying away from the traumatic sight of female desire has a clear precedent in Pynchon's novel. Benny, too, finds himself faced at one point with evidence of female perversity. Very early in the novel, in a scene strongly reminiscent of Freud's narrative of fetish-formation, Benny spies on Rachel while washing her car in the middle of the

night. From this hidden vantage, he stumbles upon a horrifying genital revelation--one in which the “genitals” revealed are not Rachel’s, however, but those of the *car*:

She had climbed in the car and now lay back in the driver’s seat, her throat open to the summer constellations. He was about to approach her when he saw her left hand snake out all pale to fondle the gearshift. He watched and noticed how she was touching it. [. . .] He didn’t want to see any more. (29)

Unlike the little boy beneath his mother’s skirt, Benny is disturbed not by the sight of a missing penis, but of a “penis” where none should have existed--a sexual object created through Rachel’s active, perverse desire. This object threatens the privileged place he assumes for the penis in the female imaginary, and his response, like that of Freud and Stencil, is a *theoretical* disavowal. He later tells Rachel: “I only started to think about being a schlemihl, about a world of things that had to be watched out for, after I saw you alone with the MG. I didn’t even stop to think it might be perverted, what I was watching. All I was was scared” (384). Rather than acknowledge a frightening female desire not tied solely to the phallus, Benny’s “schlemihl theory” strips the woman of all capacity to desire. Compare his ultimate wish with what Stencil envisions as the end of V.’s lesbian fetishism:

Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman. [. . .] Any problems with her, you could look it up in the maintenance manual. Module concept: fingers’ weight, heart’s temperature, mouth’s size out of tolerance? Remove and replace, was all. (385)

Stencil even departed from his usual ploddings to daydream a vision of her now, at age seventy-six: skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be. (411)

Stencil and Benny disavow female fetishism by positioning the fetish and female desire

within a male speculative economy that denies subject-status to the woman whose behaviour suggests that all desire is not tied to the phallus. Unable to acknowledge the disorder with which female perversity threatens their phallogocentric models, Benny and Stencil imaginatively reduce the female subject to a paradigm of orderly functioning: the machine.

But does Pynchon's text enable an alternative reading of female fetishism that would counter this disavowal? I believe it does, but only if the lesbian relationship between Mélanie and V., which receives little elaboration in the text, is taken as a lens through which to review the chapter's earlier challenge to the phallic prototype. Constructing an affirmative model of female fetishism through "V. in Love" necessitates building upon the links established in the first part of the chapter between a new visual configuration of the fetish scene, and the new form of psychic loss unique to this scene: the phantasmatic female body. Toward that end, the as-yet unexamined dreams and fantasies of Mélanie are important, for they serve as the basis for an extrapolation of Teresa de Lauretis' theory of lesbian fetishism.

De Lauretis affirms the relevance of castration to female fetishism by relying on Bersani and Dutoit's iconoclastic reading of castration-disavowal, which portrays it as a liberation from, rather than a testament to, a desire for the phallus.¹⁸ In de Lauretis' model, however, it is the *woman's* disavowal of her own (rather than her mother's) castration that matters. Female disavowal, according to de Lauretis, is never rooted in the perception of a lost penis, since that object can hold no narcissistic interest for the woman (263). Rather, female disavowal forms the basis of perverse lesbian sexuality, and of

lesbian subjectivity, because “the fantasmatic object is the female body itself, whose original loss in a female subject corresponds [. . .] to the narcissistic wound that the loss of the penis represents for the male subject” (231).¹⁹

The shift from the penis to the female body as the lost object of fetishism is grounded, for de Lauretis, in the lesbian subject’s experiential loss of the mother’s body. This loss becomes visible to the mannish or butch lesbian in a perceived failure to fulfill the mother’s desire. For the lesbian subject, the inability to live up to the mother’s expectations is experienced as a failure to fulfill the mother’s narcissistic desire for the *female* body (rather than the phallus) both in herself and in her daughter. The mother’s rejection of her daughter, which is perceived by the mannish lesbian as the loss of her *mother’s* body, is then doubled in a phantasmatic instance by a second lost object: the lesbian subject’s own missing or absent body. This phantasmatic female body, formed from what the daughter imagines to be her mother’s expectations, is later displaced to become the signification of desire (250). In turn the lesbian fetish, which points both to and away from this impossible original, represents the absence of, and wish for, a lost female body-ego. For this reason, it signifies both within an individual fantasy scenario and a wider cultural arena (228). The prevalence of masculine lesbian fetishes (such as men’s clothes) is explained by de Lauretis on the basis that these objects, in a strongly homophobic culture, deny the female body within the subject and convey a unidirectional yearning toward women (263).

De Lauretis’s model offers a convincing account of how the masculine lesbian fetish sustains “a perverse desire that specifically operates [. . .] as a particular form of

subjectivity” (261). Its limitation, however, is that it offers no comparable paradigm that would explain the significance of the fetish for a feminine lesbian subject such as Mélanie. While de Lauretis acknowledges the “masquerade of the femme” as a reverse discourse also capable of signifying the lost female body (264), it is unclear from her account how the feminine lesbian fetish *could*, in fact, act in this capacity, or whether it would do so in the same way as the masculine fetish. Given the dual cultural coding of objects such as high-heeled shoes as markers of femininity *and* as prevalent fetishes for men, it seems highly doubtful that the femme fetish could signify desire for the lost female body with the same unidirectional efficacy as the masculine fetishes of the butch. Furthermore, would a femme lesbian subject necessarily experience the loss of the mother’s body as a doubling of her own, given her closer relationship to embodied femininity?²⁰ Clearly, some nuancing of de Lauretis’s model is necessary in order to understand this reverse discourse.

Pynchon’s text is valuable here because Mélanie’s fantasies support de Lauretis’s general framework, while also suggesting how her theory can be modified to account for the femme fetish. That Mélanie, like de Lauretis’s mannish lesbian, suffers rejection by her mother at a young age is emphasized at various points throughout “V. in Love.” Very early on, the reader is informed of the indifference which her mother feels for Mélanie: “The mother had gone off to tour Austria-Hungary. She did not expect to see Mélanie in the foreseeable future” (394). Later, Itague twice reflects on this lack of maternal affection. In his discussion with Satin, he remarks, “With the father deserted, [. . .] she’s free. The mother doesn’t care” (398). And when V. asks Itague about the girl, again the

narrator tells us, “The mother did not care, the girl herself, he suspected, did not care. The father’s flight had affected her in some curious way” (400). Yet although Itague attributes Mélanie’s behaviour to the father-daughter relationship, Mélanie’s dreams and fantasies suggest that the loss of her mother is a defining one. Mélanie’s recollections of the game between herself and her father in her parents’ bed locate Maman as a silent presence in the “other room” (394). And one of her favourite daydreams is constructed with her mother as audience:

She had always wanted to slide down the great mansard roof: begin at the top and skid down the first gentle slope. Her skirt would fly above her hips, her black-stockinged legs would writhe matte against a wilderness of chimneys, under the Norman sunlight. High over the elms and the hidden carp pools, up where Maman could only be a tiny blotch under a parasol, gazing up at her. She imagined the sensation often: the feeling of roof-tiles rapidly shifting beneath the hard curve of her rump, the wind trapped under her blouse teasing the new breasts. And then the break: where the lower, steeper slope of the roof began, the point of no return, where the friction against her body would lessen and she would accelerate, flip over to twist the skirt--perhaps rip it off, be done with it, see it flutter away, like a dark kite!--to let the dovetailed tiles tense her nipple-points to an angry red, see a pigeon clinging to the eaves just before flight, taste the long hair caught against her teeth and tongue, cry out . . . (395, ellipses Pynchon’s)

What distinguishes this fantasy from those centering on her father is that Mélanie gradually sheds her clothes as she falls. This descriptive shift of focus betrays a longing to return to some biological ideal in the eyes of her mother, toward whom she is presumably sliding. But Mélanie never reaches the end of her descent; the dream always ends in mid-air, as she leaves the roof. Even in her fantasy, she is unable to carry through to a landing, unable to come even with what she imagines to be her mother’s expectations. This suggests that, though Mélanie clearly perceives the loss of the mother’s body which de Lauretis describes, she is unable to interpret that loss solely as

her own biological failing, as in the case of the mannish lesbian.

Indeed, Mélanie has no reason to believe she does not meet any purely *biological* standard of femininity her mother might desire. Pynchon's text consistently emphasizes the femininity of her body, the statuesque femaleness which shines through even her male clothes when, in the context of her lesbian relationship, she begins to dress as a boy for V.²¹ But Mélanie does not fetishize male clothes; instead, she uses feminine objects to disavow a disturbing perception about her own body, as when she dresses for Su Feng. What then is being disavowed through her need for self-supplementation?

The answer lies, I want to suggest, in the dual coding of Mélanie's feminine clothing fetishes which Pynchon's text takes such pains to emphasize. If Mélanie cannot be said to positively disavow either the biological female body, or the lack of a penis, it may remain that her fetish serves to disavow *both*. To understand how this might be possible requires a reopening of the issue as to what *kind* of female body, and/or what kind of *phallus*, Mélanie could imagine herself to be lacking in her mother's eyes.

De Lauretis's argument that the lesbian subject cannot find narcissistic investment in the penis--and that therefore her fetish has no phallic referent--stems from her assumption that the prototype of psychoanalytic fetishism is always the paternal phallus. The maternal phallus, according to de Lauretis, is not ontologically different from that of the father: it is what the mother would have were she phallicly endowed (224). As McCallum points out, this in fact limits the possible lost object of fetishism to an alternative biological norm, since it is either the *paternal* phallus, or the female body (94). Yet what if, following McCallum, one were to admit the possibility of a *maternal*

phallus, trusting her observation that, for the femme fetishist, it is the impossible phallic woman who stands as the presumed object of the mother's desire?²² An admission of this ontologically distinct maternal phallus would be in keeping with Pynchon's earlier shift toward presenting the fetish as a substitute for an *absent* biological female body.

In this scenario, the assumed object of the mother's desire would no longer be what she already has (the female body, for herself and for her daughter) but what she doesn't and can never have: the phallic *female* body which is simultaneously the ideally feminine female body. For the femme lesbian subject, the fetish would therefore signify the inability to decide *how* she had failed to live up to her mother's expectations. Mélanie's loss of her mother is experienced as a failure to embody some purely phantasmatic model of femaleness whose image is an impossible resolution of an oscillation between phallic and ideally feminine bodies. Of course this phantasmatic model can have no biological referent: no image of this body, no natural prototype exists anywhere for it. Hence when Mélanie slides down the roof, hoping to strip away the social coding of her phallic femininity in search of the impossible original she believes her mother desires, there is no biological ground on which to land. Instead, she oscillates between the two positions: her fetishes signify both that she has the phallic female body, not the ideally feminine one, since she needs the fetish, and also that she has the feminine female body, not the phallic one, again because she needs the fetish.

Moreover, as Pynchon's text suggests, this oscillation defines the splitting of the ego for the femme lesbian subject. In "V. in Love," that split becomes evident in Melanie's third dream-fantasy. This is an elaborately detailed but mostly static scene,

which seems at first to confirm Itague's pronouncements on the incestuous roots of Mélanie's narcissism. In the dream, Mélanie, dressed as Su Feng, lies supine on a bed in her dressing room, watching herself in a ceiling mirror. Beside her stands her father, now equated with the German engineer responsible for crafting the ballet's automated dancers. The dream's only action occurs when the father/engineer asks Mélanie to roll over on the bed so that he can wind the key in her back. At this point, Mélanie directs him to search between her legs for what he seeks, but he does not. Instead, he finds the key in her back and begins to wind it, causing Mélanie to awaken from the dream "moaning as if sexually aroused" (402). It would be simple enough to treat this reaction as confirmation of Mélanie's incestuous desires; but the trouble with reading this scene as proof of Mélanie's longing for the paternal phallus stems, once again, from its narrative focalization. For here Mélanie's narcissism is given a new visual configuration when she imagines herself witnessing the dream-scene from two perspectives simultaneously--one embodied, lying on the bed, and the other "as if she were disembodied and floating above the bed, perhaps somewhere behind the quicksilver of the mirror" (401). Furthermore, Mélanie's division into two perspectives is mirrored in the dream by the doubling of her own body with a faceless mannequin that lies beside her.

In the framework of lesbian desire, the two bodies on the bed--that of Mélanie and the mannequin--represent Mélanie's fantasied feminine/phallic female body and its biological impossibility, respectively. The key which forms part of Mélanie's anatomy is an imaginary rendering of the missing phallus which she conceives as the object of her mother's desire--a "female" phallus because small and displaced to the back, not

threatening the genital femaleness between Mélanie's thighs. It is for this reason that the key is the object of attention of a father who, as a double of the engineer, is also part mother, giving birth and life to the ballet's automated dancers. But the key is undecidable with regard to biology: the dream does not reveal whether it is an original part of Mélanie's body or a removable supplement. To heighten this uncertainty, Mélanie's doubled perspective frames the dream's climactic moment in sartorial detail: "The skirt twisted on her thighs: she saw their two inner edges blond and set off by the muskrat skin on the slit of the skirt. The Mélanie in the mirror watched sure fingers move to the center of her back, search, find a small key, which he began to wind" (402). Here the fact that Mélanie's slit-skirt is made of skin recalls its earlier description as a "fur-trimmed slit" (397), troubling the safe negotiation of the animacy/inanimacy divide, while also presenting the female genitals as a fetish-prototype. Meanwhile, the faceless mannequin, stripped of its clothes and any visible marks of sexuality, demonstrates the impossibility of desire and sexual difference in any referent, biological or otherwise, which precedes the doubly-coded writing of difference. Mélanie's oneiric attribution of a faceless head to her mannequin/double is a particularly apt symbol of what Derrida calls the "headless head" (209) of the question of fetishism: undecidability.

Read in this way, from a perspective that acknowledges the lesbian relationship between Mélanie and V., the dream reveals Mélanie's desire for, and lack of, a phallic/feminine female body the impossibility of whose biological referent she both affirms and denies. It is for this reason that, as a femme lesbian subject, she is not satisfied either with the father or the mother as sexual objects; the need for the impossible

amalgam, the phallic woman, remains. The femme's fetishes seek to secure for her the closest possible biological approximation of this phallic woman, the mannish lesbian. But whereas the masculine lesbian fetish signifies a unidirectional desire for the woman's body *outside* the butch, Pynchon's novel teaches us that the feminine fetish is bidirectional, representing the desire for a phallic/feminine body both outside and inside herself. These masculine and feminine fetishes complete each other at the level of fantasy (de Lauretis 251), enabling a reconstruction of the lost phantasmatic object from both perspectives.

Of course the finding of that phantasmatic object in "V. in Love" occurs only in dream. Mélanie's fate is to die on stage as Su Feng, the result of her forgetting to wear a protective chastity belt during a simulated impalement. Her death is a chilling reassertion of the centrality of the phallus in fetishistic desire; it is also a fitting conclusion to Pynchon's critical engagement with psychoanalysis. Mélanie's genital impalement before a theatre of spectators dramatizes the imaginative violence done by Stencil and Benny when, in response to female perversity, they construct their robotic, compliant female subjects. The fact that Itague, Satin, and Porcépic are left to speculate on, but never to resolve, the reason for Mélanie's tragic forgetfulness is a final blow to the claim that traditional psychoanalysis can account adequately for female sexuality. Nevertheless, Pynchon's criticism should not be taken as an effort merely to discredit psychoanalysis as a model of knowledge. If "V. in Love" satirizes Freudian theory through Itague or its ambiguous narrator, it also points the way to improvement by illuminating the concealed mechanisms through which that theory excludes and

marginalizes. Mélanie's fate is Pynchon's warning about how readily the unexamined disavowals and denials that preserve the consistency of theory are transformed into the destructive machinery of social oppression and even death. At the same time, Mélanie's narcissistic desires, and her lesbian relationship with V., are the fictional signposts by which Pynchon stakes out new ground for revision of theory and history.

Ultimately, in terms of historical models, that revision is figured in the structure of Pynchon's novel itself, divided as it is between historical and present-time chapters. Stencil's search for V.'s identity is also, implicitly, a search for the link that would restore continuity to the historical chapters, and suture these disparate historical interludes, as a group, to the novel's present. But the narrative disavowal of female fetishism in "V. in Love" foregrounds in advance the failure of Stencil's quest, and the impossibility of reconstructing a singular historical truth through his "soul transvestism." This is because, rather than establishing the historical progression of V. into an assemblage of prostheses, the chapter's theorizing about fetishism simultaneously acknowledges and denies V.'s ability, as woman, to serve as a ground of historical reality within the text.²³ With no way to ground--either through confirmation of the historical reality of V., or through the fantasies of Stencil--the relationship between the historical and present-time chapters, history in *V.* threatens to break down into an assemblage of disconnected texts. The aborted dramatization of female fetishism in "V. in Love" paves the way for interpreting the structure of *V.* as a representation of Kofman's *jouissance féminine*, in which the two textual "columns" of Pynchon's novel--the historical and present-time chapters--are left in an undecidable relationship.

Indeed, this undecidability is heightened by the novel's final historical chapter, the epilogue. Here, at last, many of Stencil's hypotheses about V. appear to receive objective verification in a narrative whose alignment with the rest of the novel is more problematic than ever. The authoritative documentation of V.'s reality in Valetta, 1919, is radically severed from narrative continuity with the rest of the novel, since relegated to a postscript, and stripped of any connection to Stencil. For this reason, McHale treats the epilogue as indicative of the novel's shift from a modernist to a postmodernist aesthetic, by virtue of its confirmation of an historical "other" world (*Postmodernist* 22). But the result of this shift from epistemological to ontological dominants is that, by novel's end, there is still no way to establish a decidable relationship between V.'s final "reality" and her earlier incarnations, nor between this "objective" narrative and the earlier historical interludes.

Instead, V.'s ambiguous conclusion reflects metaphorically on V.'s historical "end" as envisioned by Stencil. That V. eventually escapes, in the epilogue, her confinement within Stencil's historical speculations should be taken as proof that the radical, perverse excess of female desire embodied in the female fetish is not wholly contained by Stencil's (or Benny's) daydream of the mechanical woman. For this reason, just as the female fetish, in Pynchon's text, threatens the distinction between biological female body and prosthetic supplement, so too does the novel's epilogue, as a textual object, threaten the distinction between history's real "body" and its narrative "clothes." Pynchon's novel becomes a model of fetishism-as-historical practice through its presentation of numerous prosthetic histories without decidable relationship to a single

historical real. *V.* presents all historical narratives as fundamentally fetishistic, acknowledging and denying an original historical truth which, like Freud's phallic mother, never existed as anything but a wish.

A Myth Beyond the Phallus: Female Fetishism in Acker's Late Novels

Even more explicitly than Pynchon's *V.*, Kathy Acker's late fiction negotiates the problem of returning to Freud's theory of fetishism in order to affirm the possibility of a female fetish. In Acker's work, the revisionary historical potential of female fetishism is explored as a means of eroding conventional sexual and gender hierarchies. The strong political thrust of Acker's postmodernist fiction cuts through the theoretical misgivings often associated with debates about female fetishism, while also pointing out the limitations of fetishistic strategies in the context of psychoanalytic models of desire. Acker's novels betray a desire to blend an "impossible" theory of female fetishism with a politically-charged fictional and historical practice.²⁴

Where Pynchon draws attention to Freud's theoretical and historical exclusions, Acker's strategy is less subtle. Toward the middle of her penultimate novel, *My Mother: Demonology* (1993), Acker resolves the incompatibility between the psychoanalytic construction of the fetish as a penis substitute, and the practice of fetishism by women, through a surprising addendum to Freudian theory:

Father said, "For a moment, consider that Freud's model of female sexuality, that a woman and her desire are defined by lack of a penis, is true. Then, in a society in which phenomenal relations are as men say they are, women must radically contest reality just in order to exist. According to Freud, a fetish for a woman is one means by which she can deny she's lacking a dick. A fetish is a disavowal."

The era of pirates had yielded to the era of artists and politicians.
At the same time women began getting into more than fetishes. (95)

To those familiar only with Acker's controversial status among feminist scholars and critics, her engagement with female fetishism might appear as simply another attempt to stake out and inhabit the most unstable areas of feminist thought. To readers of Acker, however, this passage is intriguing not only for its provocative supplementation of Freudian theory, but also for its efforts to credit that supplement to Freud himself. Acker's work has been largely defined by its citation and, at times, plagiarism of other authors and texts. The decision, here, to cite a "Freudian" theory that never existed is an anomaly worth remarking; it suggests the importance of female fetishism to both the formal and political dimensions of her late work. As the culmination of a series of interrogations into Freud beginning in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), Acker's theorizing of female fetishism should be read as an important development and continuation of what she calls that novel's "search for a myth to live by" (Friedman, "Conversation" 17).

In an interview conducted by Ellen Friedman shortly after the publication of *Empire*, Acker remarks on the difference which separates this novel from those that preceded it. Though all of her post- "identity" novels,²⁵ beginning with *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), are predominantly concerned with issues of plagiarism and copying, Acker draws a distinction between the "deconstructive" *Don Quixote* (1986) and a new "constructive" motivation underlying *Empire of the Senseless*. The new aim is the impossible representation of a world beyond phallogocentrism:

[Y]ou try to imagine or construct a society that wasn't constructed according to the myth of the central phallus. It's just not possible when you live in this world. That's what I wanted to do in the second section of

Empire, but the CIA kept coming in [. . .]. So I ended up with “Pirate Night.” You can’t get to a place, to a society, that isn’t constructed according to the phallus. (17)

For Acker, pirates (along with sailors and tattoo artists) express both the hope and the impossibility of such a mythic society, the appeal of which resides in the ability of its constituents to “take their own sign-making into their own hands” (Friedman, “Conversation” 18). That the search for this mythic society continues to motivate Acker’s fiction even after *Empire* is evident from the work which follows. Each of her next three novels, *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990), *My Mother: Demonology* (1993), and *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996), addresses this vision of an outcast mentality and culture whose signs--sometimes belonging to a forgotten past, sometimes those of an impossible future--are always pirates, sailors, and witches. On this basis, these four novels can be seen to demarcate a final, “constructive” stage in Acker’s artistic evolution. A continuity can be traced from the revolution-torn Paris of the second section of *Empire*, in which Agone discovers hope and sexual desire through tattoo, to the crime-ridden New York of *My Mother*, the setting for “Beatrice’s Story,” in which women begin “getting into more than fetishes.” Following this line, Acker’s last novel, *Pussy*, is an attempt to render directly the mythical society of “pirate girls” which lurks in the wings (literally in parentheses throughout long sections of *My Mother*) of the previous novels.

Given this artistic trajectory, and her program to move beyond the phallic myth, it is not surprising that Acker should eventually address the issue of female fetishism. The female fetish, as we have seen, is positioned to hit psychoanalysis where it hurts, aiming at the very myth which secures the centrality of the phallus: castration.²⁶ For Acker,

though, the value of fetishism as a fictional strategy does not reside solely in its power to deconstruct psychoanalytic models. This is suggested in her return to a Freud considerably altered from that of the *Standard Edition*. Acker's divided attitude toward female fetishism emerges as an effort to adapt the psychic mechanism of disavowal into a feminist political practice while, at the same time, emphasizing the need for women to move beyond that practice, to get into "more than fetishes."

Acker's work reveals this simultaneous attraction and repulsion even when one takes Beatrice's father at his word, and simply assumes, in lieu of analysis, that a female "Freudian" fetishism is possible. At the most general level, fetishistic disavowal, as a strategy for simultaneous affirmation and denial, is the predominant mechanism at work in the psychic life of almost every Acker character. The heroine of an Acker novel is invariably troubled by her simultaneous need for a man and the need to repudiate that need. Very often, these contradictory impulses are expressed as a longing for, or rejection of, the penis. This disavowal, particularly in the late novels, does not reflect the difficulty of acknowledging *sexual* difference so much as the problem of asserting personal autonomy: "I have always felt anxiety based on this situation: I need to give myself away to a lover and simultaneously I need to be always alone" (*My Mother* 15). At this level, Acker's presentation of disavowal supports Marcia Ian's argument that fetishism has always been about, first and foremost, the problem of individuation.²⁷ In Acker, this compromise strategy has deep political consequences. Subjected to a painful recognition--often produced through rape--of the denial of her own identity and will, the Acker heroine becomes aware of the unavoidable fact of women's *collective* exclusion

from phallogocentric culture and history. Typically, her first response is an attempted retreat into imagination or dream:

Because she had not made any public thing, history, because she wasn't a man, Airplane lived in her imagination. More precisely: Because she hated the world and the society to which her childhood and then the rapist had introduced her and because she didn't even know what society she lived in (because she hadn't made it), she had drifted into her imagination.
(*In Memoriam* 221)

Where could I hide this self? I searched. Decided to hide in the mirror: in memories of my past victimizations, especially sexual abuses and rapes. As Father was making love to me, whenever my consciousness was bad and wandered into the present, I repeated the sacred laws I had just given myself: the laws of silence and of the loss of language. For us, there is no language in this male world. (*My Mother* 168)

The latter passage in particular, with its reversion to the "mirror" and the injunction against speech, fits the Lacanian definition of fetishism as a resistance to entry into the paternal law--a resistance that results in an oscillation between the imaginary and symbolic realms, and in non-communication.²⁸ Many of Acker's female characters are caught in precisely this oscillation. Clinging to a vision of a whole, inviolable (and hence imaginary) body, yet unwilling and unable to give up entirely the world of language, political action becomes a sexual rebellion which seeks the destruction of Self and Other in the real: "I destroy either myself or the world whenever I fuck" (*My Mother* 48).

But to focus solely on how Acker's characters exhibit aspects of fetishistic disavowal neglects the fact that many of these characters are engaged in a conscious struggle against the psychoanalytic construction of female sexuality. This struggle, especially when it questions the relationship between Freudian and Lacanian theory (implied in Acker's confounding play with the terms "penis" and "phallus"), makes it

impossible just to assume the political or descriptive value of female fetishism in Acker's texts. If Acker's mention of fetishism targets Freud rather than Lacan, she is nevertheless very concerned with the specifically Lacanian definition of female sexuality as "not-having" or "being" the phallus--a condition which results in women's automatic fetishization of the penis.²⁹ Karen Brennan, noting this concern in *Blood and Guts in High School*, argues that Acker's strategy is to collapse Lacan back into Freud by deliberately conflating the penis and the phallus. According to Brennan, this conflation invalidates psychoanalysis as a forum for deciding the issue of female subjectivity, enabling feminist politics to take over (256). Yet while this may be true of an early novel like *Blood and Guts*, it is less so of Acker's later work, in which the relationship between the penis and phallus is more complex. Acker's unwillingness to dismiss psychoanalysis out of hand is suggested in the reference to female fetishism already cited: "For a moment, consider that Freud's model of female sexuality, that a woman and her desire are defined by a lack of a penis, is true." Clearly, Acker's feminist politics are no longer--if they ever were--a simple alternative to phallic myths. In this light, the need for women to get into "more than fetishes" will become comprehensible only once the politically inflected relations between the penis, the phallus, and the fetish in these novels is unpacked.

One way of getting a handle on Acker's use of Freud (and through him, of Lacan) can be found in a series of methodological statements which emerge in *My Mother: Demonology*. These statements, held together by their emphasis on body-building, are an evolution of Acker's affinity for tattoo, the point where language meets body:

STORYTELLING METHOD: THE ACT OF BODYBUILDING
PRESUPPOSES THE ACT OF MOVING TOWARD THE BODY OR
THAT WHICH IS SO MATERIAL THAT IT BECOMES
IMMATERIAL. (110)

METHOD: A MUSCLE'S BUILT WHEN AND ONLY WHEN ITS
EXISTING FORM IS SLOWLY AND RADICALLY DESTROYED. IT
CAN BE BROKEN DOWN BY SLOWLY FORCING IT TO
ACCOMPLISH MORE THAN IT'S ABLE. THEN, IF AND ONLY IF
THE MUSCLE IS PROPERLY FED WITH NUTRIENTS AND SLEEP,
IT'LL GROW BACK MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN BEFORE. (112)

TOWARD A LITERATURE OF THE BODY. (114)

The "constructive" project first embarked upon in *Empire* finds expression here in a form which sheds light on the continued role of citation and plagiarism--both fictional and theoretical--within that project. The attribution of female fetishism to Freud is a breaking down of Freudian theory through a process akin to that of overloading a muscle group. It is a performance which strains the original theory to failure in an effort to push it beyond its limitations. With reference to Lacan, the quest for a "literature of the body" suggests the search for a body both *before* and *after* language, a movement both forward and backward through the symbolic to an imaginary body "so material that it becomes immaterial." In keeping with the rhetoric of body-building, however, neither of these overworked theoretical models can serve constructive ends until, together, they are "properly fed with nutrients." The task of Acker's fictional body-building is thus not only to strain and break down selective aspects of Freudian and Lacanian theory, but also to rebuild the relationship *between* Freud and Lacan on the basis of these overstressed areas. It is therefore worth examining in some detail the "nutrients" Acker uses to establish the relationship between the symbolic journey to the immaterial body,

conceived with reference to Lacan, and a Freudian model of the *female* fetish.

In *My Mother: Demonology*, the key nutrient is history. The announcement of female fetishism as a strategy through which women can “contest reality” is foreshadowed by two passages which emphasize the need to nourish psychoanalytic accounts through historical awareness. The first of these occurs early on, as a commentary on a series of letters written by the “mother” of the novel’s title. In a parenthetical aside, the narrator summarizes a section of Roudinesco’s *Jacques Lacan and Co.*, “Suicide, Sex, and the Criminal Woman”:

According to Elisabeth Roudinesco in her study of Lacan, around 1924 a conjuncture of early Feminism, a new wave of Freudianism, and Surrealism gave rise to a new representation of the female: nocturnal, dangerous, fragile and powerful. The rebellious, criminal, insane, or gay woman is no longer perceived as a slave to her symptoms. Instead, “in the negative idealization of crime {she} discovers the means to struggle against a society {that disgusts}.” (*My Mother* 30)

The section of Roudinesco summarized here focuses on the specific “historical configuration” influencing Freud’s theory of the death drive, and its adoption by André Bréton as part of the Surrealist movement (12-21). But Acker’s citation is clearly chosen to emphasize the historical coming together of feminism and Freudianism--a conjuncture that transforms the behaviour of the “outcast” into both a new paradigm for representing the female, and a rebellious political practice. And this passage paves the way for a more direct Freudian reference. While the narrator’s “mother” is attending an all-girls’ school, her friend, Beatrice, mysteriously disappears. Searching for her companion, the mother tracks down Beatrice’s boyfriend, Gallehault, who explains Beatrice’s suicide by reading Freudian masochism as a *historical* symptom:

During their meetings, he had begun to understand that phenomena or orders that seem to be psychological dysfunctions, even disorders, such as masochism, though on the surface obviously caused by childhood and other social disorders, actually arise from other sources [. . .].

Rather than for psychological, Gallehault, in love, began searching for. . . he didn't know what word to use here. . . not quite social or political. . . causes:

"I can only explain historically. By using history."

(74, bracketed ellipses mine)

Taken together, these two passages emphasize how symptoms or behaviours deemed psychologically deviant can be endowed, through historical contextualization, with new representational and political potential. This has important implications for female fetishism. If the political value of fetishistic practices for women depends on the acceptance, at least initially, of the truth of Freudian theory, then according to Gallehault, such truth will be established not through universal psychological models of development, but through concrete *historical* narratives. It would thus appear, at first glance, that Acker's breaking down and reformulating of the relationship between Freudian and Lacanian theory consists of downplaying the value of Freud in order to privilege a Lacanian emphasis on the historical construction of the subject through language.

But on closer examination the function of history with regard to female fetishism, and the relationship Acker's fiction establishes between Freud and Lacan, are more complicated than this. For to claim history as the ultimate arbiter of psychoanalytic truth entails new representational problems, of which both Acker and her characters are well aware. Foremost among these is the possibility that any use of a particular historical narrative to establish truth runs the risk of transforming that narrative into a

metanarrative--a single, monolithic version of history which excludes all others.

Resistance to this totalizing effect is emphasized in *My Mother* when, after listening to Gallehault's expansive explanation, covering some seven centuries, the mother thinks, "None of this was true. I remembered *The Waste Land*" (77). Mention of Eliot's high-modernist "shoring" of historical fragments points up the tension between Acker's formal fragmentation of history through collage, plagiarism, and pastiche, and her emphasis on the political urgency of reading history as an explanatory narrative, whose wholeness and coherence stems from its systematic repression of women's self-representation. As much as they would like a non-phallogocentric myth to reanimate those facts and fragments with a new, political historicity, Acker's characters are aware that such a myth will always be complicitous with phallogocentrism precisely because they must travel through language to reach it. In this, Acker's work becomes a particularly important example of the fundamental tensions Linda Hutcheon identifies in any encounter between feminism and postmodernist fictional practice. If Acker's quest for a "myth to live by" has a certain high-modernist ring to it, her reference to Eliot betrays a distinctly *postmodernist* irony--one which, according to Hutcheon, "rejects the resolving urge of modernism toward closure or at least distance" (*Politics* 99). That irony plays itself out later in *My Mother*, when *The Waste Land* is itself recycled for its sub-headings, "The Fire Sermon" and "Death By Water," which Acker steals for chapter titles. By exercising what Robert Latham calls her "castrating prerogative" (32) over other texts, Acker's plagiarism and collage robs those texts of the very paternal historicity implied in her constant references to the place of women "outside" that monolithic structure. This tension is visible

everywhere in Acker's late work. On one hand, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* offers a virtual paraphrase of Lyotard on postmodernism: "There is no master narrative nor realist perspective to provide a background of social and historical facts" (80). At the same time, however, sexual difference appears to provide exactly that distanced perspective:

"Men have history," Airplane replied, "carved-out history, historical periods, periods, this time of war. Since women don't have history, they don't have a chance to be adolescent for just one period. We make ourselves up." (*In Memoriam* 218-19)

Ultimately, Acker's fiction refuses to decide whether, from a female perspective, history is more accurately represented as a fragmented series of localized narratives, or as a monolithic singular metanarrative from which women have been systematically excluded.

Yet far from compromising the effort to reform and repoliticize psychoanalysis, it is precisely this ambiguous attitude toward historical representation which becomes, in Acker, the structure governing the relationship between Freudian and Lacanian theory. Acker's work assigns these representational models of history to Freud and Lacan, attempting to force a distinction between a totalizing Freudian *metanarrative*, and a contingent Lacanian *narrative*, of psychoanalytic truth. Of course, because Lacan ultimately depends on the truth of Freud, this is an impossible task. But then Acker's quest for a myth beyond the phallus is also "impossible." It is within the framework of this acknowledged impossibility that Acker's fiction overworks and breaks down the conventional relationship between the theoretical models she cites. Enforcing an impossible distinction between Freud and Lacan is important to affirming female fetishism because it provides the necessary leverage with which to pry apart the exclusive symbolic bonds between the penis and the phallus. The rebuilding of the relationship

between Freud and Lacan can then proceed through the insertion of that impossible entity, the female fetish, in the new space opened between Freud's imaginary penis and Lacan's symbolic phallus.

To see this process in action, it is necessary to recontextualize Acker's mention of female fetishism within her more comprehensive interrogation of female sexuality in Freud. That interrogation reaches a frenzied pitch in her late novels; but it has its roots in the attack, waged throughout her work, on the limited compensation Freud allowed to women for their lack of a penis: the baby. The motif of abortion that runs throughout Acker's work challenges the fixation of the baby as testament to the imaginary effects of penis envy.³⁰ Penis envy itself comes under attack by implication; but in such a way that, ironically, Oedipal fixations, and the desire for the father, are reinscribed at a symbolic, rather than imaginary, level.

This is evident in Acker's portrayal of abortion as a sexual act with the institutions that serve to keep women in a place of helplessness and dependence: "Abortions are the symbol, the outer image, of sexual relations in this world" (*Blood and Guts* 34). In the very act of rejecting the baby as an imaginary compensation for lack, Acker's characters invariably find themselves confirming the classic psychoanalytic reduction of femininity to "passivity" at the level of the symbolic:

Having an abortion was obviously just like getting fucked. If we closed our eyes and spread our legs, we'd be taken care of. They stripped us of our clothes. Gave us white sheets to cover our nakedness. Led us back to the pale green room. I love it when men take care of me.

(*Blood and Guts* 33)

In *Pussy*, this institutional power becomes reified such that, "in this world *they* always

means *medical people*" (80). By denying the baby in its capacity as a substitute penis--a denial that amounts to a rejection of castration at the level of the imaginary--these women are subjected all the more to a symbolic law that reasserts the power of the *phallus* at a social and institutional level. Acker's "historicizing" of psychoanalytic theory is evident, however, for in questioning the penis as the locus of value in the constitution of female sexuality, she suggests that the phallus continues to operate in the historical arena independent of its symbolic ties to an anatomical counterpart. Two consequences follow. First, by implicitly confirming the centrality of the phallus through a rejection of the penis, Acker shows how castration can be used to open an interpretive space between penis and phallus which is not supposed to exist. This interpretive moment enables the distinction between a *prehistoric*, imaginary Freudian penis (the lost object of Freud's theory of fetishism), and a *historic*, symbolic Lacanian phallus. Second, the relegation of history to a place solely within the province of the phallus confines history to the realm of language, or of *text*. As such, its vulnerability to Acker's plagiaristic reappropriation and revision is established. It is the effort to revise this phallogocentric text through the very tool it wields to maintain its paternal authority--the fetish--that defines the aim of Acker's female fetishism as a fictional, political, and historical practice.

This practice becomes clearer when Acker takes on the doctrine of penis envy directly. Two of the three women whose stories make up *In Memoriam to Identity* refuse to identify with a need for the penis. Airplane denies that her desire to dress as a boy bears any relation to penis envy: "It's not that I wanted a penis. I've never sympathized with Freud when he said that. Freud didn't understand the relations between sex and

power. Looking like a boy took away some of my fear" (143). That the penis, for Airplane, proves inadequate as a means of expressing the power she derives from cross-dressing, suggests a reliance on the phallus, and a symbolization of "having" that phallus, that is not restricted to the biological male organ. As in the case of abortion, however, her solution only reaffirms the very oppositional structure of "having" and "being" which her rejection of penis envy upsets. It is likewise the case for Capitol, who, in a section of the novel devoted to plagiarizing Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, discovers psychoanalytic theory through her brother Quentin. In this case, Acker offers her own version of a Freudian "first-encounter" story. Capitol tells her brother:

The first time I saw a penis was Father's. I was in Mother and Father's bedroom. I walked into the bathroom where Father was standing over the toilet, I hadn't known he was in there, and I saw it for the first time. It was standing away from him and looked weird. I had never seen anything like it, some part of the body and yet not part of the body, opposite to it. I immediately knew I was seeing what I wasn't supposed to see and I felt disgusted or frightened or both and I got out as fast as I could. Out of the bathroom. Freud said, you told me, girls always want their fathers, sexually. You think that's why women are sluts, don't you? That's just why I fuck everyone. I only thought that penis was weird. (163-64)

Capitol's disgust and fright at sight of the penis are clearly in defiance of the Freudian version of that initial encounter, in which the girl recognizes immediately her lack and takes up her position in the Oedipal scenario: "She makes her judgement and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it" ("Some Psychological" 252). Capitol's reaction opens a space of interpretation which is denied in both Freudian and Lacanian accounts of penis envy--a space in which the imaginary effects of perceived castration are open to question. If female fetishism, following the path of its male counterpart, takes root in the disavowal of castration, then

its drive is toward cathecting an object other than the penis that is capable of symbolizing “having” the phallus. Though Capitol’s promiscuity, she implies, stems from a desire for her father, that desire must be attached to something besides the possession of the penis--an attachment that owes more to the cultural reiteration of males symbolically “having” the phallus, than any imaginary longing for anatomical organs.

In this regard, Acker’s drive to affirm female fetishism charts a path analogous to that of Judith Butler’s “lesbian phallus,” which deconstructs the relation between phallus and penis by, paradoxically, overemphasizing the dependence of the phallus on the penis for its symbolization.³¹ Capitol’s refusal of penis envy deprivileges the penis as the only signifier of “having” the phallus at the same time that it cements their symbolic interdependence, by implying a desire for the phallus as *itself* an imaginary effect--a move which, as Butler points out, threatens the very distinction between symbolic and imaginary (79). By this strategy, Acker’s desire to push Freudian theory beyond its limits, toward an affirmation of female fetishism, also puts the Lacanian phallus to uses for which it was not intended. This is because denial of penis envy disrupts the mutually exclusive effects of castration in the Lacanian system: “to argue that certain body parts or body-like things other than the penis are symbolized as “having” the phallus is to call into question the mutually exclusive trajectories of castration anxiety and penis envy” (Butler, *Bodies* 84-85). Acker approaches the problem from the opposite direction--targeting penis envy directly, so as to enable the symbolic power of those substitute objects--but the theoretical consequences, as Butler relates them, are the same:

Indeed, if men are said to “have” the phallus symbolically, their anatomy is also a site marked by having lost it; the anatomical part is never

commensurable with the phallus itself. In this sense, men might be understood to be both castrated (already) and driven by penis envy (more properly understood as phallus envy). Conversely, insofar as women might be said to “have” the phallus and fear its loss [. . .] they may be driven by castration anxiety. (85)

And indeed Acker’s texts do emphasize a *female* fear of castration, in a mode which reflects this erosion of imaginary and symbolic registers. It is as the representation of castration anxiety, shifted to the social and institutional level, that the near-obsessive fear of lobotomy in Acker’s work should be read. This fear binds together her entire oeuvre and finds vivid expression in her first novel: “I’m forced to enter the worst of my childhood nightmares, the world of lobotomy: the person or people I depend on will stick their fingers into my brain, take away my brain, my driving will-power, I’ll have nothing left, I won’t be able to manage for myself” (53). In subsequent novels, lobotomy becomes synonymous with social conditioning, particularly the substitution of arbitrary rules for any possibility of free, independent expression: “No way given in this society in which to live. Nothing taught. Rules that is lobotomies taught” (*My Death* 295). By the time of Acker’s late work, lobotomization has been refined to a concept which connotes the acceptance of, and initiation into, the laws of a robotic society. In particular, lobotomy is revealed as the primary dogma of school education, especially that of the all-girls schools which figure predominantly in Acker’s last three novels. *In Memoriam* is the most explicit: “Our teachers are playing games with us, games that they love us, games that we need them, so that they can carve us up into lobotomies and servants to a lobotomized society. So that we’ll learn to obey orders” (13). Institutions such as schools and medical clinics deliberately evoke models of family life and structure as an alibi to

mask the real sites of *social* brainwashing. This structure, always portrayed as an opposition between the typically poor, outcast heroine of the Acker novel and a vague “them” consisting of teachers, doctors, and politicians, is by no means *necessarily* an opposition between male and female. Men, too, can be placed in a position of “lack” through *phallus* envy, as Thivai discovers by watching a lobotomy in a burned-out Paris ward: “That lobotomy was both a lobotomy and a sign: my pleasure (my imagination, dreaming, desiring) was being cut off from actual life” (*Empire* 146). Still, if the phallus and the penis seem so often to coincide, it is because, historically, women have been the more successfully and systematically lobotomized. Women have been denied access to, and participation in, those discourses that would lead to a knowledge of their own bodies: “I know nothing about my body. Whenever there’s a chance of knowing, for any of us, the government [. . .] reacts to knowledge about the female body by censoring” (*My Mother* 62). Lobotomy, in Acker’s work, should be read as the castration-complex placed (at least partially) in the historical arena, where its relationship to feminist politics becomes plain. An early article by Hélène Cixous, entitled “Castration or Decapitation,” makes the point: “If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as the loss of her head” (43). For Acker, being a robot is akin to being dead--a zombie-like death-in-life that grounds all her characters’ fear of lobotomy. It is likely this fear which Airplane finds partially alleviated when she dresses as a boy, and which leads her to suspect that Freud’s attention to the *penis* is a misunderstanding--if not a

mystification--of the power issues in which she feels trapped.

In this light, female fetishism--the need for woman to "contest reality" and to "deny that she's lacking a dick"--can be interpreted in Acker's late work as a disavowal of *lobotomy* as a form of castration with which women (but not only women) are threatened. As such, it is indistinguishable from the performative declaration of its own possibility. The announcement of female fetishism, read as the culmination of Acker's pointed attacks on penis envy, occupies the interpretive space opened between the penis and the phallus as privileged signifier.³² This announcement defetishizes the "normal" fetishes at the root of the Lacanian and Freudian models of female heterosexuality: for Lacan, the penis as the biological signifier of "having" the phallus, and for Freud, the baby as the only acceptable substitute for that lack, itself a signifier of an exclusively female biological capability. But the fetish in Acker ultimately replaces something that exists in neither Freud nor Lacan; it serves as the substitute for a partially deconstructed penis/phallus that plays the role of both terms and of neither. Perhaps this is why Acker devotes so little attention to describing the fetish object itself; it is as if the representation of that object would divert too much attention from the complex nature of what it disavows. Airplane's cross-dressing is only one example of a pattern that recurs throughout Acker's fiction, in which a seemingly fetishistic *practice*, and the fear it helps to assuage, is described without proportional emphasis on the *object* (in this case male clothing).³³ Of course, this deprivileging of the object reflects on the methodology Acker uses to conduct her attack on female sexuality in Freud. As described earlier, that methodology proceeds in a direction opposite to Judith Butler's work on the lesbian

phallus, which is enabled by the supposition of the substitute objects Acker neglects. Still, if Acker's drive to affirm female fetishism achieves many of the same disruptive effects as Butler's theory, her lack of attention to the object implies misgivings about the political instrumentality of the female fetish. To assess the grounds of these misgivings, it is helpful now to return to Butler, whose work sheds a direct light on Acker's methodology and its political ramifications.

The similarities between Butler's lesbian phallus and Acker's female fetishism are not coincidental. Butler's arguments about the discursive constitution of materiality play a significant role in shaping Acker's conception of the "literature of the body." In an article published shortly before *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker reads Butler's essay, "Bodies that Matter," in the context of her childhood desire to become a pirate. Acker begins by quoting Butler's central observation that, "If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all" (Butler, "Bodies" 144, quoted in Acker, "Seeing" 80).³⁴ Then, after an analysis of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, in which she compares her search for identity to that of the fictional Alice, Acker returns to Butler's argument:

But what if language need not be mimetic?

I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside its patriarchal definitions. Of course, that is not possible. But who is any longer interested in the possible? Like Alice, I suspect that the body, as Butler argues, might not be co-equivalent with materiality, that my body might deeply be connected to, if not be, language. (84)

Acker's emphasis on the need to seek that which is not possible aligns her search for the "languages of the body" ("Seeing" 84) with the impossible goal of her late fiction, which

is the construction of a myth beyond the phallus. Clearly, Butler's work, as Acker reads it, is helpful here because it offers a conception of the body as materialized language. Recall that Acker's distinction between Freud and Lacan on the basis of a symbolic, historical phallus and an imaginary, prehistorical penis opens a similar kind of space between language and the (phantasmatic) material. But while Acker's rhetoric of impossibility establishes the relevance of Butler's work to her own fictional project, it also implies why that project cannot be modelled on Butler's theoretical construction of the lesbian phallus. The reason stems from the way in which Butler uses language to speculate on and figure an "outside" to phallic myths.

In the same essay which Acker quotes, Butler poses a number of questions about the subversive potential of citation and language use, most of which focus on Luce Irigaray's strategy of a "critical mime": "Does the voice of the philosophical father echo in her, or has she occupied that voice, insinuated herself into the voice of the father? If she is 'in' that voice for either reason, is she also at the same time 'outside' it?" ("Bodies" 149). These questions, directed toward Irigaray's "possession" of the speculative voice of Plato, could readily serve as the starting point for an analysis of Acker's fiction, so heavily laden with citations from other literary and philosophical texts. Butler's question is, moreover, especially relevant to a discussion of the political potential of Acker's female fetishism, which is introduced in the voice of the "Father" (both fictional and Freudian). Insofar as Acker's mention of female fetishism is seen as instrumental to her projected escape from phallic myths, her decision to stand *inside* the voice of these fathers aims at a political and philosophical disruption which stems,

according to Butler, from rendering that voice “occupiable” (150). Acker’s echoing of the voice of authority is the first step toward a disloyal reading or “overreading” of that authority. There is, however, from the outset a crucial difference in the way that Acker and Butler conceive of this “occupation,” which becomes evident when Butler conducts her own overreading³⁵ of Plato’s *Timaeus*. Having compared the way in which Derrida, Kristeva, and Irigaray read Plato’s *chora*, Butler finds in Irigaray a strain of discourse which conflates the *chora* with the maternal body, inevitably producing an excluded feminine “outside.” Rejecting this idea that the feminine holds a monopoly over the sphere of the excluded, Butler wonders, toward the end of “Bodies that Matter,” whether the heterosexual matrix which establishes the stability of gender difference could be disrupted by the possibility of feminine penetration--a question that leads into the territory of the lesbian phallus:

If it were possible to have a relation of penetration between two ostensibly feminine gendered positions, would this be the kind of resemblance that must be prohibited in order for Western metaphysics to get going? [. . .] Can we read this taboo that mobilizes the speculative and phantasmatic beginnings of Western metaphysics in terms of the spectre of sexual exchange that it produces through its own prohibition, as a panic over the lesbian or, perhaps more specifically, the phallicization of the lesbian?
 (“Bodies” 163)

Acker, reading Butler’s essay, would no doubt have appreciated the subversive potential of this “reverse mime” (“Bodies” 163) and the lesbian phallus which it postulates. But it is Butler’s respect for philosophical and linguistic *possibility* (“If it were possible. . .”)³⁶ that makes her deconstructive methodology unattractive from Acker’s perspective. For as Acker repeatedly maintains in regard to her late fiction, it is not the possible but the *impossible* uses of language that interest her. When, after acknowledging the importance

of Butler's speculations about the discursive constitution of materiality, Acker asks the question, "Who is any longer interested in the possible?", she signals her parting of ways with the philosopher. The path to the lesbian phallus cannot be the path to the "literature of the body," for that body is defined from the outset as an impossible goal. Instead, the route by which Acker attempts to get "outside" of phallic myths follows the methodology of a *fiction* firmly grounded in the impossible--in a citational strategy, or critical "mime," which echoes the voice of a Freud that never existed.

By thus claiming impossibility as an enabling condition of female fetishism, Acker's "constructive" fiction can achieve many of the same disruptive effects as Butler's deconstructive theory. Yet it is this foundation in the impossible that also constrains the depiction of the female fetish as an object. The announcement of female fetishism occupies the impossible material/linguistic space of interpretation between the Lacanian phallus and the phantasmatic Freudian penis. To substitute that performative announcement with a description of the material object is, however, to risk restoring faith in a mimetic model of language which Acker rejects, in her reading of Butler, as inappropriate to a search for the impossible "body." The result is that Acker's female fetishism is confined to the interpretive space it occupies in the heart of psychoanalytic theory. Trapped in this spatialized "between," female fetishism can offer, in the final analysis, no guarantee of an escape from phallogocentrism. Butler gives warning about this kind of trap in her reading of Irigaray: "How do we understand the being 'between' [. . .] as something other than a spatialized *entre* that leaves the phallogocentric binary opposition intact?" ("Bodies" 149-50). Acker must therefore remain doubtful about the

political instrumentality of the fetish for women. Lobotomy-as-castration describes Acker's attempt to translate the moment of entry into the symbolic law out of the realm of the family and prehistory, into the realm of the social institution and history. Here, however, the workings of the phallus, whose function is to create an economy of "having" versus lack or "not-having," remain all too obvious.

Thus even as "Father" articulates the conception of female fetishism, Acker steps out of that narrative voice to stress the importance of women "getting into more than fetishes." "Having" the phallus for Acker means not being a lobotomized robot--a position open to women, if historically under-represented by them. But although this alternative economy, in theory, allows objects other than the penis to signify that "having," it still preserves an essential binary opposition in which one term or group is elevated at the expense of the other. Female fetishism must therefore be only a turning point, a temporary pivot on which to pause and redirect one's attacks on phallic economies. Acker's novels do not bear out McCallum's opinion that fetishism provides the means of blurring binary epistemological models, sexual or otherwise. Instead, her characters must finally wage war against these economies through direct engagement with the institutions which produce them--a feat rarely successful outside of dream: "In the section of my childhood before I had any friends, the architecture of my uniform and school building and all that they named *education* was static (not subject to time or change), or fascistic. I have destroyed that architecture by dream in which learning is a journey" (*My Mother* 193). Dreams provide the only glimpses of a revealed "literature of the body," wherein the binary oscillation between male/female and material/immaterial

are finally resolved:

Here is why I talk so much about nature. Nature is a refuge from myself, from opposition, from the continuing impossibility of me.

Nature's more than just a refuge, but it's impossible to speak about it directly. For nature can be spoken about only in dream. I can't explain this, not only to you, not even to myself. Only the dreamer or dream--is there any difference between these two?--can speak about nature.

(*My Mother* 249-50)

But because even dream is only the end of a trip through language, castration-anxiety persists: "Even in dream, my deepest fear is being enclosed, trapped, or lobotomized" (*My Mother* 49). In the context of her quest for a myth "beyond" the phallus, female fetishism marks a first step toward that end, but a step which opens up no permanent "beyond." For while Acker's fetishism displaces the penis as the sole object capable of symbolizing the phallus, and refuses to settle on any fixed economy of having versus lack, its strategy of oscillation remains bound to the backbone of that economy: symbolic castration.

Thus it is the case that, for all of her desire to reach the "literature of the body," Acker's attitude toward female fetishism as a political strategy remains divided, remains the attitude of the fetishist. Admittedly, at this point there is a great temptation, backed by many critical readings, to try and halt this fetishistic oscillation, and to read Acker's work as a concerted effort toward the development of distinctly feminine writing³⁷, within which female fetishism would play a definitive role. It is very tempting to find in Acker's late novels the fulfillment of a prophecy made by Hélène Cixous in the same article which establishes ties between castration and female decapitation: "Things are starting to be written, things that will constitute a feminine Imaginary, the site, that is, of

identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine [. . .].” (52). There is no shortage of evidence to support such a thesis. The central character of *My Mother* ends up rejecting those representations of power which, according to Irigaray (30), always involve a privileging of a “phallic maternal” over the feminine: “One result of this journey, or ‘identity,’ could be my loss of interest in ‘feminine power.’ Images of the Eternal Mother, the Virgin Mary, etc.” (*My Mother* 249). But while it would be foolish to deny Acker’s relevance to the work of Irigaray or to *écriture féminine*, her attack on penis envy and her contribution to female fetishism should not be taken as an attempt to delimit or describe a specifically female imaginary. Her portrayal of the refusal of maternity--symbolic or literal--extends also to a rejection of any desire to symbolize a pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship which, for Irigaray at least, is essential to the work of theorizing that imaginary (142-44). Acker’s refusal of feminine power and its symbolizations leads not only to an affirmation of desire as fluid and multiple (properties usually associated with *écriture féminine*), but, more importantly, to desire as *transformation*:

There’re no witches or Eternal Mother. This is who I am: one day
someone placed this ad in a paper: “Looking for LOST DOG.”
Woof. (*My Mother* 265)

Acker’s texts demonstrate a desire so fluid that it erases distinctions not only between the sexes, but between the species, between the animate and inanimate. The “literature of the body” toward which Acker strives bears a closer affinity to the “becomings-animal” of Deleuze and Guattari, than to any lost, imaginary, or pre-Oedipal maternal relationship. This point has been made before about Acker’s early work.³⁸ But it is only in the novels

beginning with *Empire of the Senseless* that Acker begins to foreground so directly and so consistently the contrast between this anti-Oedipal conception of desire, and psychoanalytic theory. Her concerns with the articulation of female desire and writing only go so far as to cast an impossible form of that desire--fetishism--as the interface between these models. If fetishism, in keeping with Freud and Lacan, is a monument erected on the path to the Oedipus complex,³⁹ it is also, for Acker, the first sign pointing the way out. Female fetishism offers a name for those moments where female desire bumps up against the transformative "beyond":

I'm the Chinese wood comb running through her curly hair. I'm the bra which outlines her delicate breasts. I'm the transparent net of her sleeves. The dress swishing around her upper legs. The silk stocking around her thigh. The heel which lies beneath her. The puff she uses after she bathes. The salt of her armpits. I sponge off her clammy parts. I'm wet and tender. I'm her hand that does what she needs. I don't exist. I'm her chair, her mirror, her bathtub. I know all of her perfectly as if I'm the space around her. I'm her bed. (*I Dreamt* 157)

Contrary, perhaps, to expectation, Acker's contribution to a theory of female fetishism consists not in the fictional description of the object, but in the reassertion of the logical and political difficulties which attend even the *naming* of the practice. The decision simply to attribute female fetishism to Freud overleaps the theoretical hesitation with which it has always been plagued--affirming, as it were, the existence of the phenomenon as given--while also, by virtue of establishing it *within* Freudian doctrine, problematizing its reformative and historical potential. Acker's attacks on female sexuality in Freud, combined with her disarmingly easy cooptation of the fetish for women, reinforce rather than allay Schor's reservations about reconstituted penis envy. So long as the fetish remains bound to an economy of having versus lack, its value as an

instrument of feminist political practice will remain suspect. Yet in the context of Acker's fictional efforts to articulate a "myth to live by," the significance of female fetishism is clear. It stands as a first step toward that impossible end, a first performance of the unthinkable within phallogocentric models. And in this it satisfies the political mandate outlined in *Empire*:

Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning.

But this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions.

What is the language of the 'unconscious'? (If this ideal unconscious or freedom doesn't exist: pretend it does, use fiction, for the sake of survival, all of our survival.) Its primary language must be taboo, all that is forbidden. Thus, an attack on the institutions of prison via language would demand the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks the codes.

(134)

To speak of female fetishism is not nonsense; rather, it is to speak that which the psychoanalytic codes forbid. As a highly disruptive example of "pretending," Acker's female fetishism performs its own justification as a fiction geared toward survival.

Notes

1. See "Ça Cloche," first published in 1981, and *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings* (1985).
2. For more on the implications of Kofman's question, see the Introduction to this study.
3. Schor's 1986 essay elaborates a theory of female fetishism in part through a reading of George Sand's novels *Valentine* (1832), *Mauprat* (1837), and *Indiana* (1832). Apter's *Feminizing the Fetish* focuses on a group of turn-of-the-century French narratives which she organizes under the heading of "pathography--a genre fusing biography, cliography (or the historical biographies of legendary men and women), and the clinical case history of exemplary 'perverts'" (xi). Included in this category are works by Emile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Octave Mirbeau, and the Goncourt brothers. De Lauretis's theory of lesbian fetishism is grounded in readings of Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), and Cherrié Moraga's play, *Giving Up the Ghost: Teatro in Two Acts* (1986).
4. Schor's scepticism about the value of fetishism for feminist politics is even more evident in a later essay, "Fetishism and Its Ironies." There she revises her earlier claims about the potential inherent in fetishistic undecidability and argues instead for "an irony peeled off from fetishism" (98).
5. For more detailed summaries of the history of female fetishism as a theory, see chapter four of McClintock's *Imperial Leather*, especially pages 200-03, and chapter two of McCallum.
6. Berressem's argument appeared first in a *Pynchon Notes* article, cited hereafter, and was subsequently expanded into chapter four of his *Pynchon's Poetics*. My references are to the later chapter. For Baudrillard's account of the history of the body, see chapter four of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, in particular pages 101-11.
7. The status of these chapters as stand-alone narratives is reinforced by the fact that one of them, chapter three, was published (with some differences) as a short story called "Under the Rose" two years prior to the novel's publication.
8. Many critics have observed that *V.* dramatizes an attempt to reconcile a sense of subjective identity with objective history. Stencil and Benny are often read as representing opposite--yet complementary--orientations to this central problem. Berressem's reading of *V.* renders fetishism a kind of implicit historical practice through the progressive usurpation of the female body by the inanimate. In this reading, Stencil's orientation to the novel's historiographic project is "metaphoric," given his historical projection of himself into the past, while Benny's wanderings are "metonymic," since confined to the historical present (53). Richard Patteson argues that Stencil and Benny fail to read any pattern in history since they cannot maintain their impersonated father/son relationship with one another (29).

9. According to Hawthorne, "Pynchon's analysis of sex and gender directly owes little to sexology or psychoanalysis" (74).

10. The central importance of the phallus in Lacan is well-known. For a discussion of the phallicism of Baudrillard's simulation model, see Gane 204.

11. Lacan's concept of the masquerade is best summarized in this oft-quoted passage:

I would say that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade. It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of the one to whom she addresses her demand for love. Certainly we should not forget that the organ actually invested with this signifying function takes on the value of a fetish. ("Meaning" 84)

12. The suggestion that Benny is the direct audience for "V. in Love" comes at the end of the previous chapter:

"So what year is it."
 "It is 1913," said Stencil.
 "Why not," said Profane. (392)

13. Apter argues that "Freud's idea of woman as 'clothing fetishist' allows us to think of woman's sartorial autoreification as the symptom of an extended, projected affirmation of female ontology" (*Feminizing* 97). McCallum, however, argues that Freud's early theory ultimately denies the possibility of individual female fetishism by making it a norm for *all* women (55).

14. This placeholder function has already been subtly emphasized in Pynchon's text, in the scene in which Schoenmaker undresses Esther. Here one of Esther's previously unspecified fetishes is identified as a black garter belt in a way that previews Pynchon's later attack on the exclusivity of the male gaze in fetishism. That Schoenmaker, according to the text, comments "*only* on a black garter belt" (109, emphasis added) suggests, first, that other fetishes remain unspecified, and second, that this particular fetish enjoys a privileged status in contemporary culture as a point of contact between the male gaze and the female body. Mélanie's nicknames will later foreground that privileged status, and V.'s comments will suggest how that privilege can actually ground a substitutive relation between the fetish and the female body. Even in the earlier scene, however, the descriptive "disappearance," in Schoenmaker's eyes, of both Esther's body and any additional fetishes which adorn it demonstrates how the essential distinction between the fetish and the female body (found in psychoanalytic and profane definitions of the fetish) both depends upon, and is partially undone by, the male gaze.

Interestingly, by thus staging his attack on the psychoanalytic fetish at the level of

the word itself, Pynchon builds upon a Freudian analogy between clothing fetishism and the fetishism of words. In the same address in which he discusses female fetishism, Freud mentions a male clothing fetishist for whom names played “an especially important role,” and who eventually became a speculative philosopher: “In this patient something similar to what took place in the erotic domain occurred in the intellectual domain: he turned his interest away from things onto words, which are, so to speak, the clothes of ideas; this accounts for his interest in philosophy” (154). That V. is herself a word-fetishist is suggested later when, addressing Mélanie a second time as “une fétiche,” the text tells us, “She pronounced the silent *e*’s, as if she were singing” (406), thereby demonstrating her love of the *visual* word-object. Furthermore, Stencil’s own word fetishism is implied in the story of his own first encounter with V. as a textual fixation, when, reading his father’s journal, “the sentences on V. suddenly acquired a light of their own” (54). In Pynchon’s novel, however, fetishization of the word “fetish” breaks down the distinction between word and idea on which Freud’s analogy rests. For an essay which further develops the connections between word- and female fetishism, see Frost.

15. Of no small importance here, of course, is the impact of V.’s pronouncement on the male speculative framework of chapter as a whole. As Hawthorne, following Allen, points out, V. herself is not a woman, but only a man’s idea of what a woman should be (86). V. has already been described in such a manner herself, when Itague reflects: “Who knew her ‘soul’ [. . .]. It was her clothes, her accessories, which determined her [. . .]” (400). It is thus V.’s absent body that condemns Stencil, a true “ghost” in Itague’s terms, to haunt the various historical periods he frequents through his “soul transvestism.” In this light, what I shall shortly describe as Stencil’s narrative effort to disavow the trauma of lesbian fetishism can also be taken as an effort to disavow V.’s role as the signifier of the absent or phantasmatic femininity which he seeks.

16. According to Molly Hite, the chapter’s Balzacian tone of narrative detachment, combined with its Parisian setting, are intended to suggest a too-literal translation of a French narrative (60). Robert Holton calls “V. in Love” the “least overtly political of the historical chapters” (336).

17. For a comprehensive list of these studies, see Matlock 31, note 2. One pre-Freudian discussion of female fetishism is found in Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a copy of which Brigadier Pudding stumbles across *en route* to his meeting with the “Domina Nocturna” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (232).

18. Disavowal of castration, by this reading, liberates the desiring subject from attachment to the paternal phallus as the sole signifier of desire, and facilitates the cathecting of new objects which are treasured precisely *because* they are authentically different from the penis. Hence the fetishist, according to Bersani and Dutoit, knows that the fetish does not completely replace the missing penis and does not want it to function solely in this way (68-69). For more on this theory, see Chapter One of this study.

19. Grosz's theory of lesbian fetishism is similarly based on the masculine lesbian subject's disavowal of her own castration; but for Grosz, the lesbian fetish is always the whole body of another woman. This fetishized *subject* stands in opposition to the partial *object* fetishized by the male (113-14). For the limitations of this theory, see de Lauretis 277-82, and McCallum 80-86.
20. The embodiedness of the femme, relative to the mannish lesbian, is suggested in the structure of the latter's desire: "I want another to love me, and to love me sexually [. . .]. This lover must be a woman--and not a faulty woman, dispossessed of her body (like me), but a woman embodied and self-possessed as a woman, as I would want to be and can become only with her love" (de Lauretis 249).
21. The inconsistency in Mélanie's adoption of male attire, given the general development of the relationship, receives commentary from those in the theatre group: "Speculation among the company was that a peculiar inversion had taken place: since an affair of this sort generally involves one dominant and one submissive, and it was clear which one was which, the woman should have appeared in the clothing of an aggressive male" (408). This inversion--which would appear to challenge my reading of Mélanie's fetishism--is itself countered by the report Itague gives (supposedly on V.'s own authority) of the "love-play" inside the loft. There Mélanie clearly plays the role of the femme, fully dressed in her feminine clothes before the mirror (409). To further confuse the issue, the text also reports that "The clothing each wore was incidental" (410).
22. McCallum argues that de Lauretis's model leaves no room for alternative lesbian subjects such as the "femme fetishist" or "dyke daddy," who rely on the fetish "to recover as their own what they could never have (the phallic woman, the child), not what they were expected to have (the female body libidinally invested as feminine)" (94-95).
23. *V.* is not the only Pynchon novel to describe a central, elusive historical truth in terms of a fetish-adorned female body. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Oedipa Maas sees the clues about Tristero--a master cabal stretching back to the founding of America--as fetishes both veiling and giving shape to an otherwise unrepresentable historical body:

So began, for Oedipa, the languid sinister blooming of the Tristero. Or rather, her attendance at some unique performance, prolonged as if it were the last of the night, something a little extra for whoever'd stayed this late. As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration that would fall away were layered dense as Oedipa's own streetclothes in that game with Metzger in front of the Baby Igor movie; as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. (39-40)

I have elsewhere read this passage as indicative of Oedipa's *legal* fetishism of her epistemological responsibilities as executrix of Pierce Inverarity's estate (see "The Ends

of Legal Fetishism,” cited hereafter).

24. It is this conscious use of psychoanalytic theory that distinguishes Acker’s female fetishism from that identified by Elizabeth Frost in the work of Gertrude Stein. Although Stein too, according to Frost, transforms female fetishism into a linguistic practice, her subversion of the psychoanalytic phallicism of the fetish in *Tender Buttons* is visible only in hindsight, occurring as it does thirteen years before the publication of Freud’s “Fetishism.”

25. Acker states that her earliest work, prior to her interest in plagiarism, is defined by her concern with autobiography and identity (Friedman, “Conversation” 15). These themes are most readily visible in her first three novels, which together form a trilogy: *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* (1973), *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining* (1974), and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (1975). Another early novel, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), also seems governed by the same themes which animate this trilogy, although Acker does not refer to it explicitly.

26. Lacan and Granoff, following Freud, conclude their study of fetishism by reinforcing its privileged status as a perversion foregrounding castration anxiety: “For our part, we find here a further justification for the particular place which, as we noted at the beginning, Freud accords to the study of fetishism” (275).

27. Ian writes: “The algorithm of one and zero symbolized by the fetish only seems to refer to the woman: as if either she has the penis or she doesn’t. It would be more accurate, more truthful, however, to say that this algorithm defines the subject in his presence or absence to himself, for himself. [. . .] It is the horrible mistake made seemingly since the beginning of history to think that this algorithm represents sex difference, rather than individuation versus relation *per se*” (128).

28. Lacan and Granoff read little Harry’s silence thus:

If Harry remains silent, it is because he is in no state to symbolize.
Between imaginary and symbolic relationships there is the distance that separates anxiety and guilt.

And it is here, historically, that fetishism is born--on the line of demarcation between anxiety and guilt, between the two-sided relationship and the three-sided one. (272)

29. Marjorie Garber considers the impossibility of female fetishism to be a consequence of its naturalization:

What if it should turn out that female fetishism is invisible, or untheorizable, because it coincides with what has been established as *natural* or *normal*--for women to fetishize the phallus *on men*? In other

words, to deny female fetishism is to establish as *natural* the female desire that the male body contain the phallus. Heterosexuality here--as so often--equals nature. Female fetishism is the *norm* of human sexuality. That is why it is invisible. (54)

30. For the little girl, according to Freud, to desire compensation for her own lack of a penis is an essential element of normal heterosexual development, and its choice of object is fixed. Penis envy, if combined with the girl's normal acceptance of her castrated state, is transformed in the Oedipal stage of sexual development from a wish for the penis, to a wish for a baby by the father. This wish, given up only because it is ultimately unfulfilled, persists even after desire for the father has been conquered, and remains a testament to her envy of the penis (see "Dissolution" 177-79, and "Some Psychological" 253-56).

31. See chapter two of Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, "The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary," 57-92.

32. Butler notes that the phallus attains its status as a privileged signifier only through a similar performative announcement (83).

33. Another example of Acker's description of fetishistic practices which downplay the object can be found in *Empire of the Senseless*, in the scene in which Agone gets a tattoo (132-40). Redding sees the tattoo in that novel as a fetish which is "not the foundation of a static arrangement of images but inaugurates a protean scenario" (290). That Acker encourages this shift from thinking about fetishism in terms of fixed objects, to examination of its dynamics as a practice, is suggested by the novel's lengthy description of the process of tattooing. Punday, although not speaking explicitly about fetishism, recognizes this shift of emphasis when he reads the tattooing scene as establishing a "more material, less object-dependent form of representation" (para. 12).

34. Acker refers to the version of Butler's essay which appears in the collection *Engaging with Irigaray*, cited hereafter. For the sake of continuity with Acker's references, I refer to that version of Butler's essay as well, identified by "Bodies" in parentheses.

35. Butler refers to her analysis as a potential "overreading" in note 46 of her essay ("Bodies" 173).

36. Earlier, Butler asks in regard to Irigaray, "how is this assignation of a feminine 'outside' possible within language?" ("Bodies" 154).

37. Friedman sums up a great portion of Acker criticism in her statement, "Acker creates the feminine texts hypothesized by writers like Hélène Cixous" ("Now Eat" 39). For readings which ally Acker with Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, and *écriture féminine*, see also Peters, Sciolino, Siegle, and Walsh.

38. "Becomings-animal" are discussed in chapter ten of *A Thousand Plateaus*. For two readings of the relationship of Deleuze and Guattari to Acker's pre-*Empire* novels, see Dix and Harper. Harper portrays desire as a force of resistance and renewal in Acker, which becomes bound to objects in an "immediate" rather than a "fetishized" manner (49).

39. Again, Lacan and Granoff are in agreement with Freud when, in their words, he says "perversions are the residue of development toward the Oedipus complex" (272).

CHAPTER FIVE

S/M HISTORY UNBOUND: COOVER AND HAWKES

*The roads are getting so super-paved and big and light
and loaded with BIG MACS and HOWARD JOHNSONS
that the only time people are forced into danger or reality
is when they die. Death is the only reality we've got
left in our nicey-nicey-clean-ice-cream-TV society
so we'd better worship it. S & M sex.*

--Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*

If you type the word *fetish* into your internet browser, you are sure to be gratified by a long list of hits promising explicit photos, streaming video, true confessions, and sometimes even fiction. For the naive researcher, such a list of sites might seem like a wealth of information, testament to the hypothesis, outlined in this and other studies, that fetishism is truly part and parcel of the postmodern condition, a word with many homes and valences on the internet. Yet unpacking a .zip file of *fetish* jpegs will likely not yield a comprehensive collection of the fetishes favoured by contemporary theory. You will rarely find billboards, West African totems, or locks of baby hair as the subject of websites devoted to fetishism. Instead, what you are likely to encounter is a profusion of images associated with theatricalized sadomasochistic practices (whips, chains, leather boots, etc.) that posits a remarkably stable referent for the word “fetish” in the sexual register. Indeed, on closer examination, this repertory of objects and practices restricts the practice of fetishism to a sphere even more narrow than that of Krafft-Ebing or Freud. If fetishism enjoys a new cultural currency as a result of the world wide web, its connotative power is tightly bound to a vocabulary of S/M¹ images which, according to Valerie Steele, has become “standardized and instantly recognizable” (164).

Not that one need go to the internet to see this radical associative delimitation of

fetishism as a cultural concept at work. The symbols of fetishism's new, restricted cultural vocabulary--in particular the dominatrix and her various effects of clothing, stance, and attitude--have been taken up by advertising to sell products ranging from antihistamines to video games to credit cards. This use of fetish images to sell commodities is a particularly trenchant example of what Jon Stratton describes as a new stage of "active" commodity fetishism. No longer content to rely on the magic it derives from its "passive" removal from the sphere of production, the commodity now engages in a direct seduction of the consumer through advertising and its association with sexual desire (31-33).

My project is not, however, to conduct a study of the use of sexual fetishism in advertising.² My concerns lie with the extent to which the contemporary narrowing of fetishism's associative range also signals the increased *visibility* of the fetish at the core of a spectacular historical narrative. To be sure, that narrative is not Freud's story of the little boy beneath his mother's skirt, nor is it Marx's history of capitalism, nor even Pietz's colonial history of the fetish. Rather, the cultural restriction of the word "fetish" to an immediately recognizable repertoire of images invokes the essential place of the fetish object within a narrative of transformation encompassing dominance and submission, pain and pleasure, in complex arrangements that are utilized by advertisers for a variety of reasons. Even bracketing speculation on those strategies, the sheer proliferation of such advertisements points up the need to analyze "spectacular" sadomasochism in any treatment of fetishism as a postmodern narrative form. The role of the fetish in S/M narratives marks a crucial movement toward affirming the value of the

fetish for *constructing* narratives whose contexts and objects, such as dungeons, chains, whips, and uniforms, betray a distinct “historical” sensibility, even if that history is irretrievably hackneyed or clichéd.

In order to examine the fetish’s role as a historical object in spectacular narratives of S/M, it is necessary first to analyze sadomasochism as a drive or practice itself embodied in historical narrative form. A crucial starting point for this inquiry, as in the study of fetishism, is Freud’s account of the psychical history at the root of sadomasochism. As early as the 1919 essay, “A Child is Being Beaten,” Freud advanced the notion that all sexual aberrations have their roots in childhood fixation (182), and he set out to analyze the phenomenon of beating fantasies as having a “historical development which is by no means simple” (184). In analyzing the evolution of these fantasies in women, Freud identifies three distinct phases, each defined by a shift in the form taken by the beating fantasy. The first phase, belonging to an early stage of childhood development, is characterized by the phrase, “My father is beating the child,” and represents the girl’s desire to see another, unspecified child beaten so as to signify her own exclusive claim on her father’s love. At this stage, according to Freud, the child’s jealousy is certainly motivated by the development of her erotic interests, but the fantasy itself cannot be called explicitly sexual or sadistic (187). In the second phase, characterized by the sentence, “I am being beaten by my father,” the shift in the identity of the beaten child is an expression of the guilt which the incestuous desires of the first phase has occasioned in the girl. At this point, the identification of the girl with the beaten child involves a transformation and convergence of the earlier proto-sadistic, and

proto-sexual, phase, into what Freud calls “the essence of masochism.” As a result, this second phase, which remains unconscious to the patient, becomes “not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for that relation” (189). Finally, in the third phase, which takes conscious form in the statement, “a child is being beaten,” both the father and the child being beaten are now ostensibly absent from the fantasy. In this stage, the father is typically replaced by another authority figure, such as a teacher, while the child remains an inactive spectator. Interestingly, while this phase of the fantasy provides the source for the patient’s (apparently sadistic) masturbatory pleasure, Freud’s conclusion is that the sadistic *form* of the fantasy in this final stage masks a satisfaction that is in fact masochistic (191). Although Freud concedes that this analysis of beating fantasies does little to explain the origins of masochism (193), he goes on to suggest that the analysis does confirm suspicions that masochism is not in itself a primary instinct, but rather “originates from sadism which has been turned round upon the self” (194). This psychic/historical “turning round,” earlier described as a guilt-induced “regressive substitution” of sadistic by masochistic impulses, strengthens the conviction with which Freud opens the essay, that all sexual aberrations (fetishism among them) have their origins in childhood fixation, and in the Oedipus complex (182, 193).

The historical theme in sadomasochism remains evident but takes a somewhat different form in Freud’s later, and definitive, essay on the topic, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” first published in 1924. Here Freud identifies three types of masochism, which he labels erotogenic, feminine, and moral (161). Only the second of

these, the feminine variety, conforms to the stereotypical image of masochism as a practice rooted in the experience of bodily pain, and surprisingly, this kind of masochism is most common in men. What makes it “feminine,” according to Freud, is its situating of the subject in “a characteristically female situation,” such as castration or birthing (162). Underlying this feminine masochism, however, is the primary, or erotogenic type, whose definition depends on Freud’s controversial theory of the death drive, and its partial “taming” at the hands of the libido. By this model, sadism proper consists of that portion of the transposed death drive which serves sexual functioning, while erotogenic masochism is the remnant of the death drive which is not directed outward to other objects, but keeps, instead, its original object in the self. Erotogenic or primary masochism is thus evidence of the fusion of instincts essential for life, as well as the model for that secondary or “feminine” masochism which is the result of the regression of the sadistic impulse back to its earlier phase, with the self as object (163-64). Finally, the third form, moral masochism, is defined by its escape from the sphere of sexuality as commonly understood, taking the form of a pleasure in pain stemming from the relationship between a sadistic super-ego and a masochistic ego. Here the ethical sense, which stems from the desexualization of the Oedipus complex, is resexualized through a moral masochism that drives the subject to satisfy his or her need for punishment by performing immoral actions that will provoke the chastisement of the last representative of the parents, the conscience (169-70). As in the case of the beating fantasy and secondary or feminine masochism, this moral masochism demonstrates once again a critical historical regression to an Oedipus complex only partially, or inadequately,

overcome.

In drawing attention to these Freudian models as a starting point for examining S/M as a historical narrative, I do not seek to emphasize only the issue of historical reversal common to both of them, nor to draw the obvious parallels between this reversal and that found in Freud's essay, "Fetishism." Suffice it to say that, while Freud did not establish an explicit relationship between the historical valences of fetishism and sadomasochism, both vied for the status of premiere importance in analyzing castration and its role in the historical development of the perversions.³ The importance of these essays in the present context stems, however, from their introduction of a number of the key issues central in subsequent treatments of S/M. In particular, Freud's essays have sparked intense and ongoing debate on three topics: the relationship between sadism and masochism, the naturalization of masochism in women, and the political and moral value of S/M practices. In each case, the historical formation of S/M has come under close scrutiny.

Among theorists to have addressed the first of these issues, that of the relationship between sadism and masochism, none have been more influential than Gilles Deleuze, whose lengthy introduction to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* continues to enjoy a prominent place in most contemporary accounts of masochism. In the course of his Introduction, Deleuze argues against any theoretical complementarity between sadism and masochism on the basis that such a "unity of opposites" (13) does injustice to the clinical specificities of both perversions, as well as to the literary sources (the work of Sade and Masoch, respectively) from which sadism and masochism draw their names.⁴

In Deleuze's view, the Freudian notion of a common pleasure-pain instinct at the root of sadism and masochism is an abstraction designed to privilege a homogeneous "evolutionism" over what should be treated as distinct psychic, historical, and literary formations (46). For Deleuze, a return to the distinct literary symptomatologies of Sade and Masoch reveals the need to construct separate psychic and historical accounts of sadism and masochism along "irreducible causal chains" (14).

Another prominent challenge to Freudian theory, likewise concerned with its historical narrativization of sadism and masochism, is that of Leo Bersani. Bersani reads the "instabilities" in Freud's originary masochism as the basis for an atemporal ontology of sexuality (*Freudian* 39). Masochism, in Bersani's view, is not an isolatable perversion like sadism or fetishism, but rather the substratum of all sex, capable of collapsing the hierarchical and narrative organization of sexuality which psychoanalysis attempts to effect (89).⁵ Unlike Deleuze, then, who argues for distinct literary symptomatologies of sadism and masochism, the distinction between sadomasochistic practices and a masochistic ontology of sexuality consists, for Bersani, in the dysfunctional narrativizing of the latter by the former (41). The goal of a text such as Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* is to create sadomasochistic sexuality mimetically not through its *contents*, or through descriptions of sexual acts, but rather through its textual *rhythm*" (52).

Yet not all contemporary thinkers on the topic have diverged so sharply with Freud on the issue of separating sadism and masochism. Kaja Silverman has followed Deleuze in treating sadism and masochism as functionally distinct perversions, but rejects any essentializing literary or psychic difference between them. For Silverman, discussion

of the difference between sadism and masochism is productive only insofar as it focuses on their potential to subvert perceived sociobiological norms of sexual behaviour (185-87). And in her recent study of sentimental subjectivity and its relation to the gaze, Laura Hinton sides with Freud in treating sadism and masochism as “dialectically and functionally unified” (5). For Hinton, the contested term “sadomasochism” enables a reading of the cultural and sentimental gaze that supports Foucault’s analysis of perversion as a strategy by which power unifies and consolidates itself (15).

Silverman and Hinton, both of whom argue (from opposing perspectives) the need to reassess the psychic evolution of sadism and masochism with regard to social and cultural developments, also engage with a group of theorists who have taken up more explicitly the issue of the cultural naturalization of sadism and masochism. Here again the particular literary-historical origins of these perversions are at issue. For Carol Siegel, masochism is a specifically textual invention responding to gender-based political influences on Victorian poetry and prose. In early twentieth-century England, according to Siegel, the ready acceptance of Freud’s ironic relegation of “feminine masochism” to men was in part a result of anxiety over the rise of feminism in the Victorian period, and its threat to male social and marital dominance (11-16). The feminization of earlier models of male submissiveness encouraged by the new concept of masochism forces one to consider the question, “Should we see the construction of masochism as a kind of misogynist cultural conspiracy?” (Siegel 16).

Going further back into Western literary and cultural history, Michelle Massé reads the Gothic tradition as a pointed reminder of the cultural amnesia which conceals

the social instruction of women in masochistic sexuality (3). Massé stresses that, contrary to persistent sociobiological phallacies, “the intertwining of love and pain is not natural and does not originate in the self: women are taught masochism through fiction and culture, and masochism’s causes are external and real” (3). Similarly, Linda Ruth Williams draws attention to the fact that sadism, through its “natural” identification with male aggressivity, is a more comfortable concept than masochism in contemporary culture (175). It is this fact which explains, in part, the fall from favour which Freud’s model of the death drive has experienced in post-war theory, despite the fact that the drive was a response to essential questions about the origins of both sadism and masochism (174).

Closely allied to these examinations of the historical naturalization of sadism and masochism are contributions to a third key area of debate, centering on the moral and political potential of S/M practices. For Freud, the resexualization of the Oedipus complex through moral masochism was “to the advantage neither of morality nor of the person concerned,” and he blamed the turning back of sadism upon the self on social and cultural inhibitors (“Economic” 169-70). In their anti-psychoanalytic work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari attack (in a manner quite different from Deleuze’s earlier work on masochism) the Freudian notion that masochism is any way tied to the need for symbolic paternal punishment or produced by cultural suppression of the instincts. Instead, they argue that masochism is best understood as an effort to construct, through ritualistic tools and scenarios involving pain and suffering, a body without organs on which the “continuous process of positive desire” can be experienced and maintained

(155). Predicated on the “conversion of forces and the inversion of signs” (156), masochism is thus an implicitly political practice bent on securing an escape route from hegemonic cultural constructions of desire.⁶ In recent years, this emphasis on S/M practices as betokening subversive or escapist political practices has been taken up from numerous perspectives. Several theorists have read such economies of transformation and subversion--whether lived or fantasized--as embodying progressive political potential. Pat Califia, for one, endorses S/M practices on the basis that their fantastic sadistic and masochistic characterizations function as subversive parodies of the gender and sexual roles enforced by patriarchal cultures (37-38). Even more affirmative in this vein is Anne McClintock, who describes S/M as a “radically historical phenomenon” which emerged in the Victorian period as a countercultural discourse capable of revealing and refusing the bases of social power in narratives of imperial progress (143).

According to McClintock, S/M manifests an essential “economy of conversion,” whereby the trappings of state power (boots, whips, uniforms, etc.) take on new signification in staged narratives of hierarchical and gender difference. Ultimately, the “outrage” of these practices consists in their ability to reveal the strategies by which power naturalizes itself through arbitrary appeals to God, fate, or science (143-44). Again, however, such views have not gone unchallenged. Mariana Valverde expresses deep scepticism about the extent to which S/M practices can disrupt the social meanings and hierarchies from which they derive their erotic power. In Valverde’s words, “It may be possible to use these [S/M] forms in order to defuse or undermine their social meaning, but one would have to be constantly struggling to prevent oneself from sinking comfortably into the ‘usual’

dynamics of power and the ‘normal’ meanings of the roles and images being used” (175). Occupying a position somewhere between McClintock and Valverde is Silverman, who maintains that only male masochistic scenarios enable any recuperation of a “subversive edge” to perverse practices, since they subvert the social hierarchy of masculine dominance. Sadism, by contrast, remains complicit with the dominant social codes in its various fantastic and theoretical varieties (186-87).

If contemporary theorists of S/M remain divided on these important questions, there are nevertheless two issues on which almost all of them implicitly agree, and which are essential to a study of fetishism as a historical and narrative practice. First, nearly all of these models theorize a divide between real and fantasy worlds through which the erotic, political, or signifying power of S/M is diagnosed. For Deleuze, the function of both sadism and masochism is not to describe the world as it is, but to create a “counterpart of the world capable of containing its violence and excesses” (*Coldness* 33). Less optimistically, Bersani reads sadomasochism as the most potent and damaging example of a mimetic sexuality which diverts interest away from the productive dislocations of an inherently mobile masochistic desire, encouraging “a destructive fixation on anecdotal violence” (70). And McClintock’s reading of S/M practices describes it as a theatrical performance which reveals that social power is subject to historical revision even if the practice itself “does not finally step outside the enchantment of its own magic circle” (143). These examples could be buttressed by others, both affirming and denying the political potential of this theatrical/narrative sphere, but it remains true that in virtually every case, S&M practices create an “alternate

world” in which social and/or psychical history can be replayed or reviewed.

As a second point of agreement, in almost every model mentioned above, the tool for creating the “alternate world” is the fetish--that object in which psychic personal history and the social real meet and collide. Once again Deleuze and McClintock are representative. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that the creation of the masochistic body without organs depends on the reconditioning of desire from the organ-based organization of the woman’s legs, to the zone-based “intensities” of the mistress’s *boots* (156). Likewise, for McClintock, the boots, whips, and chains of S/M are essential because they dramatize visibly the conversion of “public punishment” to “private pleasure,” parodying the means by which the state maintains its tenuous hold on power (143). Essential both to the construction of the S/M scenario, and to its political and historical potential, the fetish plays a privileged role to the point that it is almost impossible to conceive of S/M without it.⁷

On the basis of these commonalities, the majority of S/M theory implicitly supports several of the theses that I have attempted to establish as necessary to understanding fetishism as a historical practice. First, S/M theory in general backgrounds a reading of the fetish as *sign* in order to portray it as a constructive *tool*, whose power resides in its ability to mediate between symbolic systems. Second, S/M theory acknowledges that the symbolic systems between which the fetish mediates can be considered separate or at least functionally distinct “worlds” in the mind of the fetishist; in this it gestures toward an affirmative or ontological approach to fetishism. Finally, S/M theory portrays the fetish as capable of revealing the arbitrary organization of social

power and history, rather than as a simple obfuscation of that history.

Yet perhaps owing to the narrative origins of S/M which critics such as Deleuze, McClintock, Siegel, and Massé invoke in support of their theoretical analyses--origins that are usually Victorian and realist in orientation--much of this potential for treating fetishism as historical practice in the context of the S/M scenario is lost. This is because traditional literary depictions ("symptomatology," in Deleuze's phrasing) of sadism and masochism enforce a rigid distinction and narrative hierarchy between real and alternate worlds which is buttressed, rather than problematized, by the role of the fetish. While S/M scenarios, in the most symptomatic texts analyzed by these theorists, are typically invoked as fantastic escapes from the real, facilitated through the imaginative reappropriation of selected socially coded objects for new personal ends, that transformative potential is portrayed as a one-way circuit from social to personal meaning, or from a singular, inviolable *real* history to alternative fantasy worlds. Always, it is the singular social history which inevitably contains the personal S/M narrative, framing it in such a way that its formal repetitions, reversals, and elisions pose no threat to the "natural" teleology of the social historical world which contains it. As a result, even if S/M practices are presented as capable of shedding light on the arbitrariness of that historical real through the fetish's previous social or historical meaning, those practices are never able to "speak back" through the fetish which enables them, and never allowed to challenge directly the authoritative narrative of history from which they remain mere offshoots.

This ultimate curtailing of S/M's historical and narrative potential is visible on

close examination of either Sacher-Masoch or Sade. Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (originally published in 1870) exhibits an elaborate framework whereby the story of Severin is made available to the reader only at a series of significant narrative removes. Severin's relationship with Wanda, his lover and student in the acting out of "suprasensual" fantasies, is presented in a series of journal entries offered by Severin for the instruction of the novel's narrator. This narrator's interest in Severin's story is sparked by a dream which he himself has had about a beautiful fur-clad Venus, the description of which begins *Venus in Furs*. Hearing the details of this dream, Severin offers his journal as a warning about the dangers in realizing one's suprasensual desires. In the first eight pages of the novel, there is thus a rapid movement from dream to reality to embedded history that threatens to confuse boundaries between reality and fantasy, past and present. Severin's journal furthermore blends impressionistic descriptions of reality with fantasy and dream in a manner that erodes the distinction between these territories. Yet throughout the journal, Severin's eloquent ability to express and explain his desires to Wanda gives the apparent erosion of the reality/fantasy divide the air of a deliberate, self-gratifying experiment with narrative material. For rather than being overcome by his passions, as he so often states, Severin appears to have full knowledge of the significance of his attachments, as well as their origins. As he explains to Wanda early in their relationship, his fixation on furs has both personal and scientific explanations. While a boy of fourteen, the whipping he received at the hands of his aunt transformed her into "the most desirable woman on God's earth" (93), and fixed the fur-lined jacket she wore at the time into a symbol of ideal female cruelty. At the same time,

however, Severin also acknowledges an inborn tendency to love fur, which stems from its physical properties as a conductor of both electricity and warmth (96). Despite the abandonment he thus professes to his suprasensual proclivities, Severin's desires remain firmly rooted in an explanatory narrative of origins that predetermines the range and scope of those desires in advance.

It is the rigid divide between allowable and disallowable levels of "play" that ultimately transforms his efforts to *fulfill* his desires into a drive to discover their *cure*. As soon as Wanda oversteps Severin's prescribed limits of cruelty, he is able immediately to escape the influence of his perverse tendencies. His final, "healthy" re-instatement of boundaries between reality and fantasy, and past and present, is signalled at the end of the novel by the moral he draws for the narrator. Although Severin has learned from his experiences that it is necessary to grant equal rights to women so that they will not always be "man's enemy" (210), he has, nonetheless, decided to live his life according to the maxim that it is better to hold the whip rather than suffer under it. *Venus in Furs* thus ends by showing how masochistic practices can illuminate current political reality, but offers no hint of any transformative or interventionist potential therein.

The same can be said of Sade, whose *120 Days of Sodom*, as the most extreme vision of a sadistic philosophy and aesthetic, likewise affirms a clear distinction between real and alternative histories. The debauch in which that novel's four libertines engage depends for its conception and realization on a radical separation between the outside world and the events enacted within the Chateau of Silling. This separation is effected not only through Silling's defensive fortifications and extreme geographic isolation (it is

located on a mountaintop whose entrance, once sealed, “there is not on this entire earth a single being, of no matter what species you may imagine, capable of gaining” (236-37)), but also through the agreed-upon rule whereby no act may be permitted in the Chateau prior to its narration by the four female story-tellers. This prohibition subjects the desires of the libertines to a teleology predicated on an existing social hierarchy of criminal acts, beginning with comparatively harmless sexual perversions and progressing through mutilation, torture, and murder. That each of the libertines seeks, at least once, to thwart this ruling and to satisfy his desires prior to their revelation in the story-tellers’ narratives emphasizes the capacity of sadistic desire to disrupt even the most ruthless criminal’s capacity for clear, rational execution of his mandate. For Sade, however, abandonment to longing or desire is a condemnable buckling of philosophical resolve,⁸ whose place is always reasserted in the *120 Days* through Sade’s authorial obsession with chronology and dating. Thus while the debauch has as its implicit objective the violation of all social standards of sexual morality, its structured performance betrays its allegiance to at least the model of history adopted by the society it rejects.⁹ Ultimately, as in *Venus in Furs*, Sade’s historical (if not political) accountability to that society is seen in the fact that the survivors eventually return to Paris, equipped with a detailed list of those sacrificed at Silling and the specific dates of their demise.

Different as the literary “pornologies” of Sade and Sacher-Masoch are, the fundamental realism of both authors reinforces what McClintock identifies as the inability of the “alternate” S/M world to finally “step outside the enchantment of its own magic circle” (143). At the same time, this compulsive realism raises important questions

about the political potential which McClintock and others find in any rigid binary distinction between real history and parodic S/M theatre. These questions become all the more insistent when S/M's parodic "economy of conversion" is made to depend upon the conscious selection of fetish objects whose social significations are simply reversed in S/M practice (McClintock 147). As Jonathan Dollimore observes, the trend toward endorsement of S/M as politically-inflected parody has its roots in Judith Butler's seminal work on drag performance (319-20), and it is subject to the same caveat regarding its political potential. Toward the end of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler makes a convincing case that parody of the real is not necessarily a guarantee of shifting power relations; indeed, the dominant matrix of heterosexuality can sometimes augment its hegemony *through* its denaturalization in practices like drag (231). Similarly, I would add that the parodic function of the fetish in S/M economies is no guarantee of its ability to challenge dominant historical narratives or social value codes, as the example of contemporary advertising suggests. For this reason, the description of S/M as a "radically historical phenomenon" demands further investigation if such a designation is intended to connote more than just the revelation of the practice's (conventionally understood) historical origins.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall argue that postmodern American fiction lends itself to this re-investigation insofar as it constructs S/M narratives that portray fetishism as a disruptive historical practice. Through detailed readings of Robert Coover's *Spanking the Maid* (1982) and John Hawkes' *Travesty* (1976), I shall seek to prove that postmodernist fiction radically challenges previous literary portrayals of S/M

practices (such as those of Sacher-Masoch and Sade) in part by removing the framework of objective history and reality which contains those practices. Both of the novels I shall analyze are “minimalist” in the sense not only of their overall length (each is less than 125 pages long), but also in terms of their setting and historical context. Coover’s novel is confined to the setting of a bedroom, with only a brief glimpse of the adjoining garden and bathroom, while Hawkes’s novel is set in a speeding car. In each case, only the vaguest hints about geography and history are given, and what we know of the characters must be derived almost exclusively from their roles in the central ritual which each novel depicts. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, it is precisely this radical minimalism which, in each case, enables the erasure of the divide between social history and personal sadomasochistic sentiment. This erosion of boundaries frees S/M narratives to speak directly *as* historical models while, at the same time, giving rise to complex and often disturbing political consequences.

Re-Drawing the “Magic Circle” in Coover’s *Spanking the Maid*

The formal and thematic roots of *Spanking the Maid* can be traced back to a much earlier collection of short stories, *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), in which Coover solidifies the aesthetics of what is sometimes called “cubistic fiction.” There, in stories like “The Elevator,” “Klee Dead,” and “The Babysitter,” Coover builds his narrative around the fragmented presentation of events which, if sorted into conventional linear plots, reveal inconsistencies and even contradictions in the temporal flow. Much like the visual cubism of Picasso, which challenged realistic and impressionistic depictions of the

object by synthesizing incompatible perspectives on the object within a single frame, Coover's cubistic fiction challenges both realistic and modernist depictions of the narrative *event*, including within its diegetic frame possibilities that remain logically irreconcilable even if attributed to different characters.

In "The Elevator," for example, the formal progression of the story unfolds in keeping with its setting, depicting narrative possibilities like floors on an upward rise through an office building. This vertical as opposed to conventional horizontal narrative movement serves as an ironic reflection on Coover's consistent metafictional aim, which is to prevent the reader from reaching "any interpretive high ground" (Saltzman 504). Even more provocatively, in the oft-anthologized "The Babysitter," Coover uses television and the motif of channel-switching as the framework for his depiction of domestic reality during an evening in the suburban Tuckers' home. As the babysitter channel-surfs between romantic dramas, old-west gunfights, and spy thrillers, the story's events unfold and are replayed in conformity with the conventions of the program on the set. In particular, the imperative of maintaining domestic order, which falls to the babysitter as she attempts to wash, dress, and discipline the Tucker children, is alternately endowed with overtones of romance, violence, perversion, and comedy. Recurring scenes depicting spanking, involuntary urination, phallic fixation, and cross-dressing suggest an American family life organized around fetishistic rituals whose meaning is as multiform as the televisual medium which structures and inspires them.

In many ways, *Spanking the Maid* is an elaboration of the central themes of "The Babysitter." In the novel, however, the cubistic presentation of domestic reality is not

organized around the television, but, as the title's capitalized "S" and "M" suggest, around the historical conventions of S/M narratives. Coover's novel returns to what Siegel and McClintock identify as the Victorian origins of S/M,¹⁰ but in such a way that historical context is minimalized until it appears only a side-effect or afterthought to fetishistic practice. Unlike "The Babysitter," in which a clear historical framework serves as a gloss on the fractured, fixated rituals of domestic sex and violence, in *Spanking the Maid* historical setting is suggested only through the themes and implements (excessive concern with the social order, devout Christianity, details of the maid's uniform) that characterize the ritual itself.

Alternating between the perspectives of the maid and her master, the novel foregrounds the essential need to maintain social and domestic order as the maid, under the severe scrutiny of her master, goes about her ritualized duties: washing the floor, making the bed, opening the garden doors, and hanging the towels. Invariably, she forgets something, whether it be a required task, or a part of her uniform or cleaning "paraphernalia," and must be appropriately punished. Then the master, charged with the maid's spiritual instruction and improvement, must fulfill his own duty in accordance with the dictates of his "manuals," which provide detailed information on the methods and implements of spanking. Confined to the repetition of this pattern and to the restricted setting of the bedroom, the narrative circles incessantly around what McClintock identifies as two sets of pervasive Victorian fetishes. The first, which derives its power from patriarchal state structures that create and enforce gender and class distinctions, consists of the master's whip and the maid's carefully laundered uniform,

beneath which her buttocks wait like a “perversely empty ledger” (*Spanking* 81) for the inscription of the master’s “teaching.” The second set, a by-product of the first, stems from the Victorian disavowal of working class female labour,¹¹ which gives rise to the fetishization of the “theatrical paraphernalia of domesticity: brooms, pails, water, soap, dirt [. . .].” (McClintock 147).

Yet if Coover’s novel presents social, gender, and object relations that conform to those out of which S/M practices were historically constituted, I want to suggest that those practices, as depicted in the text, raise serious questions about the historical and political potential attributed to them by affirmative S/M theorists. If, as McClintock argues, the subversive strength of S/M is that it “plays social power backward, visibly and outrageously staging hierarchy, difference and power, the irrational, ecstasy, or alienation of the body, placing these ideas at the center of Western reason” (143), then this political efficacy depends upon a clear contextual divide separating the *play* of spectacular S/M from the historical and social context it parodies. At the very least, I would argue, it depends upon a recognizable “centering” of concepts such as irrationality or ecstasy from a previously peripheral position within that social and historical context. *Spanking the Maid*, with its relegation of historical context to the background of the S/M narrative, seems to begin at a point where this centering has already taken place. As a result, it invites the interpretive question as to whether its radical temporal disjunctions (repetitions, revisions, not to mention the characters’ own obsessions with time) are effects of an S/M practice which has already succeeded in re-writing Victorian and colonial history on its own terms, or one which has simply sealed itself off once and for

all inside its “magic circle,” never to trouble again the broader social world from which it has come.¹²

This interpretive question is rendered all the more urgent in light of the fact that Coover’s alternative S/M world, far from “playing social power backwards,” often duplicates and reinforces it. As Jerry Varsava observes, the religious overtones of the ritual in which master and maid participate reinforce traditional gender hierarchies: “Religious zealotry is indistinguishable here from gender bigotry. The former veils their ongoing (if unexpressed) need for a conventional economy of power within their relationship [. . .]” (*Contingent* 129). Indeed, by maintaining this “conventional economy,” *Spanking the Maid* strategically violates many conventions of the traditional S/M narrative which serve to ground *its* economy of conversion. The most obvious of these is what Elizabeth Wright identifies as a fundamental aspect of the spanking topos in both nineteenth century pornography and in Freud’s “Wolf Man” study: the punishing of the male master by the female maidservant (398).¹³ In Coover’s text, the aristocratic master’s whipping of his female employee calls into doubt any potential for progressive gender- or class-based role reversal. And this political ambiguity remains even if one switches tacks and attempts to treat *Spanking the Maid* as a kind of Gothic metaphor for the cultural “training” of women in masochistic ideals. According to Michel Massé’s reading of the Gothic, even a heroine who enjoys her suffering can embody a kind of revenge on the system that created her:

The masochist’s suffering, first imposed upon her and then embraced, can accuse the other without any overt sign of revolt and without a word being spoken [. . .].

Paradoxically, the masochist insists that she is a blank page but, in

demanding that the author so inscribed her be known, makes public her own identity and signature. Her masochism maintains that it is not she who is at fault [. . .]. (50)

But although the motif of the “blank ledger” recurs throughout the novel (54, 69, 81, 86), it is impossible to reduce the maid’s role to that of suffering female heroine because the constant oscillation between the maid’s and master’s perspectives refuses to valorize the suffering of the maid over the cruelty of the master.¹⁴ Rather than depict a faultless heroine who undergoes punishment for the sake of exposing a concealed villain and regaining her agency, Coover’s text emphasizes the mutual responsibility each character feels for the other, and portrays the loss of personal agency as something feared not by the maid, but by the master (as we shall see).

Furthermore, if we follow Deleuze, this failure to privilege one of the two perspectives obliquely questions the very distinction between sadism and masochism. Deleuze defines the differing pornologies of Sade and Sacher-Masoch in part through their positioning of the reader on the side of torturer or victim, respectively. Through repetition, the reader is made to empathize with the Sadean torturer, while the creation of suspense causes one to feel the victim’s anticipation of coming punishment--a central aspect of the masochistic literary aesthetic (*Coldness* 31). In *Spanking the Maid*, however, repetition and suspense are evoked interchangeably throughout, and both can be found within the maid’s perspective in particular:

She enters, deliberately, gravely, without affectation, circumspect in her motions (as she’s been taught), not stamping too loud, nor dragging her legs after her, but advancing sedately, discreetly, glancing briefly at the empty rumpled bed, the cast-off nightclothes. She hesitates. No. Again. She enters. Deliberately and gravely, without affectation, not stamping too loud, nor dragging her legs after her [. . .]. (9)

She remakes the bed tight and smooth, not knowing what else to do,
vaguely aware as she finishes of an unpleasant odor. Under the bed? Also
her apron is missing and she seems to have a sheet left over. Shadows
creep across the room, silent now but for the rhythmic tapping of the
pizzle in the master's hand and the pounding of her own palpitating heart.
(60)

This use of suspense and repetition to characterize the maid's perspective lends Coover's text a truly "somasochistic" literary symptomatology, in terms of a fusion of the masochistic and sadistic aesthetics outlined by Deleuze. It also supports Laura Hinton's claim that a Freudian, combined notion of "somasochism" is best suited to expressing the dynamics of sympathy as a "voyeuristic-fetishistic medium" (23).

The political valences of Coover's reifying of traditional gender and class boundaries within the S/M narrative are further complicated if one considers the scripts which animate those practices. The maid's efforts are guided not only by the instruction of the master but, more importantly, by a series of religious poems she recites throughout the novel: "*Oh, teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see, and what I do in any thing, to do it as for thee! [. . .] A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine: who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and th' action fine!*" (14). The maid's role in the ritual she endures with the master is thus ostensibly defined by a striving toward spiritual perfection through labour, and her punishments are corrective measures necessary to attaining that goal. For the master, by contrast, the ritual, and his role within it, serves the purpose of maintaining a vital social order in resistance to the chaotic and destabilizing forces of nature: "That God has ordained bodily punishment [. . .] is beyond doubt--every animal is governed by it, understands and fears it, and the fear of it keeps

every creature in its own sphere, forever preventing (as he has taught her) that natural confusion and disorder that would instantly arise without it" (63-64). Guided by his manuals, which prescribe the tools and methods of a "divine government of pain," the master's motives for partaking in the ritual are a search for personal perfection through discipline and philosophical insight into the origins of the social order.

In thus portraying Christianity and a vaguely-defined "social study" as the discourses controlling the maid's and master's engagement in S/M practices, it is tempting to see Coover's novel as a postmodern retreading of the relationship between the most famous Victorian practitioners of domestic S/M, Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick. Munby (1828-1910), a barrister, and Cullwick (1833-1909), a "maid of all work," met in London in 1854 and afterward carried on a secretive fifty-year love affair whose details, including ritualized games of bondage and discipline, were recorded in their diaries. Also recorded were the differing motivations underlying their activities. For Cullwick, the primary impetus was a Protestant Christian belief in the power of labour to secure her place in heaven, while Munby justified his erotic photographs of Hannah and other working class women on the basis of a "sociological" interest in their outlook and living conditions. In McClintock's reading of their affair, it is Cullwick's Christian motivation that secures a contestatory political element to S/M activities which, like those of Coover's maid and master, appear to strengthen rather than defy traditional social and gender hierarchies. Cullwick's concession to wearing slave-bands and chains, and to licking the boots of Munby, is explained by the fact that Christianity, like S/M itself, is predicated on an "economy of conversion: the low exalted, the high made low"

(McClintock 158). The ritual life of Munby and Cullwick retains a subversive edge because it self-consciously dramatizes the Christian script depicting transcendence through fleshly mortification in a new domestic theatre, with a new domestic iconography.

But Coover's novel, despite its similar invocation of Christian and sociological motivations, does not lend itself to such a reading because it deliberately problematizes the relationship between script and performance, and between motivation and ritual. As the story wears on, both characters begin to realize that, instead of the discourses controlling and lending meaning to the punishment ritual, it is the ritual that lends meaning to the discourses:

For a long time she struggled to perform her tasks in such a way as to avoid the thrashings. But now, with time, she has come to understand that the tasks, truly common, are only peripheral details in some larger scheme of things which includes her punishment--indeed, perhaps depends upon it. Of course she still performs her duties *as though* they were perfectible and her punishment could be avoided [. . .]. (63)

Eventually, it becomes impossible for maid and master to distinguish their motivating ideals of spiritual and rational perfection from the punishment itself, and they cease trying to do so. This confusion of means and ends impacts upon the reader in such a way that, as Varsava points out, it becomes impossible to tell whether the novel's central theme is "somasochism, a morbid religious zealotry, or indeed some other issue" (*Contingent* 119). Despairing, the maid abandons her duties, deliberately goading the master into spanking her, and the master, in defiance of the manuals and his social responsibilities, ignores her provocations. In the novel's final pages, often described as a kind of orgiastic *jouissance* of language, the distinction between the master's and maid's perspectives, as

well as between reality and fantasy, are wholly broken down, and every word and object becomes associated linguistically with every other.

What, then, is one to make of this portrayal of S/M practices, which appears to slither out from underneath any historical or political reading one attempts to set upon it? Resisting the urge to dismiss Coover's depiction of S/M as a simple pretext for metafictional indulgence,¹⁵ I want to suggest that it is precisely the reversal of those traditional points of interest in the S/M narrative (the class and gender role reversals) that make *Spanking the Maid* a particularly valuable reflection on the relationships between S/M practice, fetishism, and historical narrative. By refusing to foreground the expected subversions of gender and class hierarchies associated with S/M's economy of conversion, Coover's novel refocuses political attention on the object itself and its function in the ritual creation and ordering of history. In this light, the cubistic form of the novel, and its chaotic end, make it a kind of devolutionary parable depicting the breakdown of a fixated, sadomasochistic historical narrative into that primordial masochistic ontology of which Bersani writes.

To see this devolutionary movement in operation, it is necessary to look more closely at how the problem of time and history, and of the political and social meaning of the S/M ritual, become embedded in the perspectives of the master and maid. In the maid's case, it is the problem of *figuring* or *structuring* time that is the central preoccupation. Arriving to begin her tasks, she is constantly reminded of the time she has lost--an impetus that always sets her about her work with renewed vigor. While she works, she frequently engages in abstract musings over origins, which lead her to a

private theory: “a solution of sorts has occurred to her to that riddle of genesis that has been troubling her mind: to wit, that a condition *has* no beginning. Only *change* can begin or end” (23). As the novel wears on, she questions and revises this theory, first reversing its terms (“only conditions can begin or end” (88)), and finally admitting, in the closing pages, “that change and condition are coeval and everlasting: a truth as hollow as the absence of birdsong. . . .” (97). Moreover, the maid’s wavering over the problem of time and teleology is reflected in the oscillation between suspense and repetition that defines her perspective. In addition to grounding, in Deleuzian terms, the pornological symptomatologies of masochism and sadism, suspense and repetition are also antithetical literary strategies for figuring time: suspense provokes a heightened sense of teleology, the awaiting of an expected end (“change,” in terms of the maid’s theory), while repetition tends to deny teleology and change and insists on a return to beginnings (“condition”). The maid’s eventual conclusion that both change and condition are “everlasting” signifies her conscious refusal to privilege one of these means of temporal representation over the other.¹⁶

For the master, by contrast, the problem of time is primarily one of assigning *meaning* to history and events. He perpetually muses over “how things began,” but places the problem of origins and ends in the context of his abiding concerns with agency and free choice: “Has he devoted himself to some higher end, he wonders [. . .] or has he been taken captive by it? Is choice itself an illusion? Or an act of magic?” (78). For the master, the possibility that his actions may be controlled by a magical fate or destiny rather than free choice spawns an obsession with interpretation. He worries incessantly

over the proper decoding of the manuals, and of assigning meaning to objects and to the actions of the maid, whom he constantly addresses with phrases like, “And another thing!” “What does this mean?” And just as the maid’s problem with figuring time is mirrored in the oscillation between suspense and repetition, so too the master’s chief problem with the illusory basis of choice and agency is figured in the increasingly muddy line between dreaming and reality that dominates his perspective. Recalling the dream that opens *Venus in Furs*, the master awakens each morning troubled by fragments of remembered dreams that stay with him throughout the morning. Indeed, his harsh treatment of the maid aligns him with the Severin who, having “awakened” from the nightmare of his supersensual fantasies, confirms his social theories in part by demanding obedience of his female maidservant with threats of the whip (Sacher-Masoch 61). Yet for the master of *Spanking the Maid*, it is just such a definitive interpretation of the social order, and its origins, that eludes him. Try as he might to explain to the maid the reasons which ground the need for discipline, “he knows that it is he, not she, who is forever in need of such explanations” (25).

Taken together, the fundamental problems embodied in the perspectives of maid and master--that of how to order or represent time, and that of the possible illusory nature of agency and free choice--serve as the motivational “scripts” which determine their ritual practices. I place “scripts” in quotation marks here, for unlike the ostensible controlling scripts of the religious poems or the manuals, these motivations are concretized not in linguistic form, but in the objects which define the “magic circle” circumscribing the ritual world. These “boundary objects”¹⁷ are the garden doors and the master’s bed,

which signify, together, the borders of S/M's alternative world along the conventional lines of a divide between the public/private, and personal memory/social history. They also serve as the sites at which each character's motivational concerns (which remain unvoiced throughout the novel) are symptomatically concretized for the other.

For the master, the boundary object which occasions his obsession with interpretation is the bed in which he awakens each morning from troubled, half-remembered dreams. As the place where reality and fantasy meet, the bed is a kind of gateway between ontological realms, from which the master "tears himself painfully" (32) each morning. The fact that the maid does not understand the difficulty of awakening, which he compares on several occasions to the trauma of birth, strengthens his conviction in a fundamental "failure of communication" between them. Yet though the master rarely speaks about his fragmented dreams, the bed nonetheless takes on a particularly important, and ambiguous, role for the maid. As one of her central duties, the making of the bed is described as alternately her "favorite task of all" (19) and an "awful trial" (22). The reason for her wavering attitude toward the bed is the fact that, pulling back the covers, she is never certain of what she will discover beneath them. These objects include:

Things that oughtn't to be there, like old razor blades, broken bottles, banana skins, bloody pessaries, crumbs and ants, leather thongs, mirrors, empty books, old toys, dark stains. Once, even a frog jumped out at her. No matter how much sunlight and fresh air she lets in, there's always this dark little pocket of lingering night which she has to uncover. (28)

Elizabeth Wright treats these "pseudo-objects" as symbolizations of Kristeva's abject, "excluded unconscious contents which return and force the subject to repeat its inevitable

encounter with the Real” (402). But this reading, which describes the S/M ritual as an effort to attain an exact correspondence between desire and the Symbolic (always impossible, according to Lacan), neglects the important relationship established by the novel between dream and desire. It is perhaps more appropriate to read the objects in the master’s bed as the material detritus of his dreams--products which, in Freudian terms, have undergone an incomplete transformation in the forge of the dream-work. In this context, the objects represent those repressed wishes that, as dream-thoughts, have undergone the first three of Freud’s dream-work processes--condensation (which compresses the thoughts into manipulable units), displacement (which effects a transvaluation of the psychic intensities attached to these units), and regard for representation (which privileges visual over non-visual material)--but without having been subject to the fourth process, secondary revision (or the arrangement of the transformed dream-thoughts into an intelligible pattern, the dream’s “manifest content”). The objects in the bed are those materialized and transvalued “word-things” which, according to Lyotard, are the results of desire “*working over* of the text of the dream-thoughts” (24).¹⁸ The fact that it falls to the maid to deal with these objects charges her domestic duties with the psychic function of a secondary revision.¹⁹

Although the master’s participation in the ritual, based on his faithfulness to the manuals, appears to occasion no pleasure for him--“he doesn’t enjoy it, nor does she surely” (80)--his desires are nonetheless satisfied every time the maid makes even the slightest error in the performance of her duties. Her underwear, which she finds in the bed at the start of the novel, become a focal point for establishing this relationship

between her failed efforts and the master's desire. Both the unexplained disappearances of the underwear, and their sometimes conspicuous visibility (falling down around her ankles), are proof of her inability to maintain the level of decorum required by the master. As a result, she is whipped; but what seems like failure in her domestic responsibilities is actually the *success* of her dream-work, the aim of which is to lend the master's repressed wishes an intelligible form that will both satisfy and disguise them. The spanking is that form. This is why, though he is certain that he has consciously "chosen" this ritual way of life, he remains concerned about the illusory nature of choice itself, attached as it is to repressed wishes which, even if materialized and highly visible, remain unknown to him.

Meanwhile, for the maid, it is another boundary object which both reminds her of her "problem of genesis" and solidifies that problem, materially, for the master. The garden doors, which it is the maid's task to open each morning, establish a distinction between the repetitive time of the ritual inside the bedroom, and the more conventionally linear time of the outer world. While events repeat themselves endlessly inside the bedroom, outside time appears to move linearly, as suggested by the gradual change, through the course of the novel, from the "sweet breath of morning" (14) to the "sweet breath of late afternoon" (95) which is let in by the doors. Not unlike the bed, and its role as a gateway between dream and reality, through which the master must pass on awakening each morning, the garden doors serve as a gateway between the bedroom and the outer world which is negotiated solely by the maid. The master has occasion to wonder at one point about the maid's outside life: "Where does she come from? Where does she go? He doesn't know" (53). Yet although the master appears to have no life at

all outside the bedroom,²⁰ the garden doors force him to engage materially with that outer world. As the maid opens the doors each morning to let light and air into the room, the master is never certain whether the new day is poised “to love him or to kill him” (11), and he both fears and awaits the time when the maid will, out of clumsiness, shatter the doors completely (24). His relationship to the doors, and to the garden, is as ambiguous as that between the maid and his bed. He constantly wavers between wanting to take a walk outside and seeking refuge in the comfort of his bed, and when the maid asks him if he is afraid of the garden, he “horses” her so mercilessly that she decides never to bring up the issue again (89).

Ultimately, just as the master’s dreams take tangible form for the maid, so the maid’s unexpressed concerns with “lost time” have a physical effect on the master, who is the only one who seems to age through the course of the narrative. Toward the end he complains of being “so old” (77) as his confidence in the ritual fades. Contrary to Ziegler, the division between the garden and bedroom does not correspond to the distinction between a “lost paradise” and “reality” (50), but instead to two modes of temporal flow which intersect on the body of the master. The master’s ageing body, increasingly tired and weary as the novel wears on, testifies materially to that “lost time” over which the maid obsesses. This configuration of desire achieves its most pointed expression in the master’s dwindling erection, with which the maid is frequently confronted as she awakens him or as he steps out of the shower: “Watching his knobby plant waggle puckishly in the morning breeze, then dip slowly, wilting toward the shadows like a closing morning glory, a solution of sorts has occurred to her to that

problem of genesis that has been troubling her mind [. . .]” (22-23). This is why, regardless of when the maid arrives to begin her duties, she is always “late,” for lost time is both the conscious motivation for renewed vigilance about her work, as well as the hidden factor that assures her work cannot be completed properly. Ultimately, her failures satisfy her desire because they are the best proof of the *master’s* failed labour of instruction: “to the extent that she fails, he fails” (49). It is only through the ritual that she is able to recover, through physical contact with him, that lost time which returns to her in the pain of the spankings.

If the bed and garden doors thus demark, in Coover’s novel, the limits of S/M’s magic circle, there is nevertheless a problem suggested by the satisfaction of desires that depend upon the breaching of those limits. Both the master’s desire, concretized through the objects in the bed, and the maid’s desire, lingering over a loss embodied physically in the detumescing penis, threaten to undo the satisfactions toward which they aim. The ontological ambiguity that characterizes the objects in the master’s bed threatens to annihilate altogether the distinction between dream and reality which the bed, as a boundary object, preserves. Likewise, the maid’s demand that the master’s body show physical proof of its ability to figure lost time inevitably threatens with extinction the very object of her desire. Both characters betray an obscure awareness of this problem. At one point, the maid “finds herself wishing she could make the bed once and for all: glue down the sheets, sew on the pillows, stiffen the blankets as hard as boards and nail them into place. But then what? She cannot imagine. Something frightening” (83). And the master recalls being stung by a bee which got into the bedroom through the partially

opened doors: "For a long time after that he kept the garden doors closed altogether, until he realized one day, spanking the maid for failing to air the bedding properly, that he was in some wise interfering with the manuals" (87). To attempt to fix desire--even if that were possible--also destroys it, by sealing the ritual within its magic circle, as both characters realize. It is here that the crucial role of "failure" in the figuration of desire is revealed at its deepest level. The ritualized narrative in which desire becomes embodied can never wholly contain that desire. At best, it can lend a mimetic quality to the movement of desire as it passes from object to object, but always, as Bersani suggests, at the expense of producing a "destructive fixation on anecdotal violence" (70). The maid's constant complaint, "He's drawn blood!" is a metafictional commentary on the way in which desire inevitably "bleeds out" of the narratives that attempt to confine it.

Nevertheless, as Coover's text also teaches us, there remains one crucial tool for stemming--if not stopping--the leakage of desire, and that is the fetish. The whip and the maid's buttocks serve as fetishes which structure the spanking ritual and preserve, as much as possible, its fragile integrity within its semi-permeable magic circle. The whip is repeatedly described as a "stout of engine of duty"--a description it shares ambiguously with the master's penis (45). It is also the only object perceived by the maid as "terrifying in its perfection" (60). In the context of her constant striving after perfection through labour, these descriptions are significant because they designate the whip as an object metaphorically substituting for the penis as an object of desire, while affirming contradictory propositions regarding the aim of that desire. As a substitute for the master's erection, the whip embodies the goal of failure toward which her own mistakes

(unconsciously?) direct the master's instructional endeavours; but at the same time, as a "perfect" instrument created by him in accordance with the manuals, the whip also affirms his ultimate success. These two propositions empower the whip to memorialize the loss embodied in the master's penis, but without the destructive detumescence that haunts the biological organ. The whip is thus a true fetish in the psychoanalytic sense because it is created in order to stop time, taking the place of a lost phallus *before the loss is recognized*. Although, as in the case of any fetish, this effort to stop time cannot be wholly successful (because the loss which occasions it has already been "seen"), the whip is able, through the ritual, to duplicate the process of its formation, generating a redirection of desire which--however momentary--opens a temporal and historical diversion in its drive to extinguish itself. It is precisely the delay which that diversion occasions in the flow of desire that is experienced by the maid in the form of pain, and which becomes figured in "involuntary motions both vertically and horizontally" (76) through which her buttocks respond to the strokes of the whip. Only in this sense, I believe, can we understand Bersani's description of S/M practice as mimetic of the masochistic flow of desire. And it is herein that the historical sensibility of S/M narrative for the maid lies: in the allegorizing of the narrative of fetish-formation, filling the temporal space opened by the return and fixation of desire (the "lost time") with pain.

For the master, the fetish functions somewhat differently, although it conforms to the same role of a substitute for the focal point of his desires, the maid's underwear. In his case, however, the substitution is metonymic rather than metaphoric. As the proper site for the maid's ever-disappearing and reappearing underwear, her buttocks become a

the (perhaps obvious) point that, by focusing the maid's desires on a substitute phallus, and having the master fetishize the "perversely empty ledger" (81) of the maid's buttocks, Coover effects an inversion of the expected configuration of male and female fetishism. In psychoanalytic terms, according to Lacan, the maid should take as her fetish object the master's biological penis, while the master, following Freud's 1927 essay, should shrink away from, rather than embrace, the biological "reality" of female castration. Perhaps it is here, then, at the point where desire fixes itself to the object, that Coover's novel finally dramatizes S/M's distinctive economy of conversion in gendered terms. Rather than depict gender- or class-based role reversal at the level of the ritual's manifest content, Coover cuts to the psychic mainspring of sexual and gender difference in unconscious desire. It is here, if anywhere, that the political potential of the master's and maid's S/M practice emerges, in the possibility to upset theoretical structures of desire that elevate the phallus to a transcendental signifier while naturalizing the denigration of the female body as biologically insufficient.²² Yet even at this level it is impossible to proclaim the ritual at the center of *Spanking the Maid* as a "progressive fetish practice" (McClintock 67)²³ without reservation. Since the phallus remains--even if displaced--a key to the maid's desire, Coover's text poses the question whether any economy of conversion, at least in the form of simple *reversal* of roles, is capable of grounding a truly subversive practice.

At any rate, Coover's novel does not develop these political implications. What it does do is emphasize that the historical and political valences of S/M practices can be attained neither by fortifying the magic circle that defines them, sealing them off and

reifying the distinction between ritualistic and historical narratives, nor by opening too wide those boundaries in the hope of a widescale “rewriting.” The historical and temporal sense that emerges from reading the novel, with its oscillation between suspense and repetition, dream and reality, suggests that S/M’s political potential depends, as Valverde argues, on a constant policing of those boundaries that distinguish it from the “normal” social order (174-75). But it also suggests that no attempt at such policing can hope to contain the essentially masochistic desire that undergirds the ritual. Even the fetish does not prevent desire from breaking down the narratives it constructs in order to describe and stem its flow, as the end of the novel reveals. The master’s growing weariness--the very sign of the maid’s desire--eventually causes him to abandon the ritual. In the final scenes, with garden doors thrown completely open, the maid stands chewing on the remnants of the master’s bedclothes as he walks through the garden that is both a real and dreamed landscape.

Through this ending, Coover’s novel can be read as a kind of metafictional musing on the turning back of narrative’s own “death drive” on itself. Here the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction comes face to face with what Bersani calls the masochistic ontology of desire. As an effort to fuse sadism and masochism in narrative form, *Spanking the Maid* defines a literary pornography that is truly sadomasochistic in Deleuzian terms, and which compliments the achievements of Sade and Sacher-Masoch even as it parodies them. In the process, it challenges the concept of S/M as a “radical historical phenomenon,” and invites us to consider whether history, as dependent on narrative, is not instead a radically *sadomasochistic* phenomenon.

Hawkes's Death Drive as S/M *Travesty*

In moving from *Spanking the Maid* to Hawkes's *Travesty*, it is worth drawing attention to a few important differences between these novels, especially insofar as they impact upon the presentation of S/M practices in each. Perhaps the most important of these, given my broader concerns with examining fetishism as a historical practice, is the difference in historical setting. Where Coover's novel suggests a return to the origins of S/M in Victorian domestic life, Hawkes's novel takes place in the modern and public space of the automobile, as it races toward a pre-planned collision with a stone wall. Cruising at high speed through a rainy night in southern France, the car carries its driver and two passengers to their impending deaths in what the driver, identified only as "Papa,"²⁴ describes as "a clear 'accident' [. . .] in which invention quite defies interpretation" (23). Within this cramped setting, and spanning only an hour and forty minutes, Hawkes's novel consists of an extended monologue in which Papa justifies his "private apocalypse" (47) to those he incorporates within it: his daughter, Chantal, and his wife's lover, Henri. Thus unlike *Spanking the Maid*, whose form is defined by the alternating perspectives of master and maid, *Travesty* is dominated by the perspective of a single character, such that Henri and Chantal, though present in the car from the start of the narrative, are never allowed to speak directly. Yet despite these differences of historical context and form, I want to suggest that Hawkes's novel also makes an important contribution to debates about the political potential of spectacular S/M practices, as well as what separates those practices, in narrative terms, from the underlying drives of sadism and masochism. In the course of explaining why he has

decided to commit a double murder and suicide, Papa speaks at length about a past relationship with a young lover named Monique. Central in his memory of that relationship is an incident in which he and Monique enact a highly stylized spanking scene. Of particular interest about this scene is Papa's shift, through it, from the "sadistic villain" (68) to one who understands the importance of suffering--a shift of awareness with important implications for the specific form of his "private apocalypse," and, I suggest, to the structure of Hawkes's novel as a whole.

Published in 1976, *Travesty* is the last in a trilogy of novels organized around probing the interrelationships between sexual desire, aesthetics, and death. In the first two novels of the trilogy, *The Blood Oranges* (1971), and *Death, Sleep, and the Traveller* (1974), Hawkes presents first-person narratives told from the perspective of a male narrator attempting to lend artistic order to the relationship between himself and his wife, and to their sexual dalliances with others. Particularly interesting and disturbing about these extended monologues is the detachment with which the narrator relates the events of his story, substituting for emotional response an obsessive and clearly unhealthy concern for aesthetic symmetry. In *The Blood Oranges*, for example, Cyril, who describes himself as a "sex-aesthetician" (21), relates the story of a doomed sexual relationship between himself and his wife, Fiona, and another married couple, Hugh and Catherine. Though on the surface a novel about what was referred to, at the time of its writing, as "wife-swapping," Cyril's manner of telling the story is clearly intended to imbue it with a lyrical and symbolic intensity that will elevate it above what he calls the "hatred of conventional enemies" (36). As the novel proceeds, however, it becomes

apparent that Cyril's effort to create aesthetic coherence and beauty is more than just an effort to lend order to past events. The almost delusional symbolic associations he establishes between events and objects play a key role in the breakdown of his marriage, and in the death of his male rival, Hugh. At the end of the novel, Cyril's casual philosophizing about Hugh's suicide, the mental collapse of Catherine, and the departure of his wife, reveal a narrator in whom the obsessive desire for narrative order has blocked his ability to perceive the effects of that desire on his own life experience. His final observation that, "Everything coheres, moves forward" (271) places death and insanity reassuringly within the grip of a broader narrative order, while questioning the authority and reliability of the narrator who creates that order.

Travesty pushes to an extreme this concept of an obsessive narrator attempting to create aesthetic beauty through a fusion of sex and death. For Papa, the meticulously engineered "private apocalypse" is "an 'accident' so perfectly contrived that it will be unique, spectacular, instantaneous, a physical counterpart to that vision in which it was in fact conceived" (23). It is also, as he tells Henri and Chantal, an effort to relive a previous "formative event" in his life, which he first alludes to as "a travesty, involving a car, an old poet, and a little girl" (47). Though he does not relate the details of this "instructive" event until the very end of the novel, Papa believes that Henri, at least, will ultimately acknowledge the poetic validity of the impending collision because he is both a poet of some renown and, as the lover of Papa's own wife, intuitively keyed in to its final significance. Of primary importance to Papa is the interpretive legacy left by the crash: it must be completely opaque to the authorities charged with piecing together the

circumstances of the accident (24), while yet transparent to his wife, Honorine, who will come to understand that it was “all for her” (125). For that reason, the final leg of the drive takes them past the chateau in which Honorine lies sleeping, during which Papa hopes that the automobile’s racing engine and screeching tires may “somehow attract the briefest response from Honorine’s dormant consciousness” (23).

It is in some wise appropriate that a depiction of S/M practices should insinuate itself into Papa’s monologue; after all, the concept of a “death drive” originates, at least in Freud, with an inquiry into the relationship between sadism and masochism. Yet although Papa describes the sadomasochistic encounter with Monique at great length, and labels this encounter, like the earlier formative event, “instructional,” discussion of S/M has played a minimal role in critical readings of Hawkes’s novel. Critics who have addressed the scene with Monique have typically treated it as only one more diversionary detour in the monologue of a madman who is ultimately, despite his “rational” explanation, just as confused about his underlying motivations as is the reader. Donald Greiner, in one of the earliest treatments of the novel, reads the scene with Monique as support for his thesis that Papa’s entire monologue is nothing but an “inside narrative,” and that the coming collision, as well as the characters of Henri, Chantal, and even Honorine, do not exist outside Papa’s mind (265). In this view, the S/M scene, which originates, as Papa admits, in ideas taken from pornographic texts, is particularly symptomatic of Papa’s delusional creation of events and characters that satisfy his own erotic desires (268). Similarly, Charles Baxter argues that the S/M scene, like the “formative event” and Papa’s other memories, does not provide enough information to

explain the accident to come. As a result, the reader is “maneuvered out of analysis” and left with a text that asserts “imagination’s power at the expense of the self and the world” (879-880). These readings reduce the scene with Monique to a problem of verifiable *content*, whose truth is as suspect as Papa’s repeated assurances that he is not jealous of Henri. S/M thus becomes only one more ambiguous signpost in what Paul Emmett, in another early reading, calls the novel’s “epistemological maze” (174).

Alternatively, when the problem of S/M is addressed by critics, it tends to be taken as proof of *Travesty*’s status as a metafictional object text for Hawkes’s own aesthetic theories. Criticism of *Travesty* has seized upon, and occasionally seized up over, the provisional theory of fiction advanced by Hawkes during the writing of his sex/death trilogy. In an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *The Blood Oranges*, Hawkes states that, “I believe in coldness, detachment, ruthlessness, a lot of consciousness in the choice of narrative material, in the creation of scenes and so on” (Hawkes and Scholes 201).²⁵ In an oft-quoted passage from the same interview, he also adds:

It seems to me that fiction should achieve revenge for all the indignities of our childhood; it should be an act of rebellion against all the constraints of the conventional pedestrian mentality around us. Surely it should destroy conventional morality. I suppose all this is to say that for me the act of writing is criminal. [. . .] Obviously I think that the so-called criminal act is essential to our survival. (204)

In light of these statements, it has become a virtual cliché in criticism of *Travesty* to describe Hawkes’s assault on, and seduction of, the reader. Just as Papa traps Chantal and Henri inside the car, so too does Hawkes trap the reader inside the mind of Papa, collapsing any interpretive distance from which to assess his ravings.²⁶ What the reader

is finally left with is a novel that is both self-reflexive and self-consuming, for if Papa's private apocalypse is successful, there can be no one left to tell the tale.

Furthermore, both of these issues--the novel's collapse of critical and interpretive distance, and its collapse into the aporia of a self-consuming artifact--have occupied a central place in discussions about the essential modernism or postmodernism of Hawkes's aesthetic. On the one hand, according to Baxter, it is the reader's "helplessness" in the face of a text which deliberately denies critical distance and undercuts epistemological grounding that qualifies *Travesty* as a "virtual catalogue of Modernist devices" (873-74). Yet on the other hand, according to Patricia Tobin, the voyeuristic denial of critical distance in Hawkes's work aligns it with "the projects of postmodern literary art, which textualize sexuality and thereby sexualize the reader" (286).²⁷ In this case, I would argue, the victimization of the reader in *Travesty* can be seen as a clear example of what McHale describes as the metaleptic sadomasochism intrinsic to postmodernist fiction (*Postmodernist* 226).

I intend to argue, however, that neither of these approaches to the S/M scene in *Travesty* (one which disregards it as ambiguous *content*, and the other which largely ignores it, privileging a *formal* and metafictional understanding of Papa's cruelty) adequately accounts for the significance of Hawkes's presentation of sadomasochistic economies. Similar to Coover's presentation of S/M practices in *Spanking the Maid*, Hawkes's novel places special emphasis on the importance of the magic circle that frames its central ritual, and presents that ritual as a unique form of historical practice. In Papa's case, part of that practice consists in the translation of what he considers a clichéd,

pornographic S/M economy (the spanking scene with Monique), into a new “poetic” ritual which exorcises both his own remembered demons and some of the disturbing attitudes of the society in which he finds himself. Of course, since the concept of a ritual implies repetition, and Papa’s private apocalypse is clearly a one-time event, part of the significance of Hawkes’s portrayal of S/M is its interrogation of the divide between ritual and underlying instinct. Papa’s private apocalypse is a literalization of the psychoanalytic “death drive” which affirms, at the level of form, the validity of that model as a representation of desire, while yet seeking to challenge its dominance as a cultural discourse through those same explosive “contents.” This double imperative is crystallized in the fetish of the automobile itself, which enables Papa to create and maintain a sadistic narrative order, while also carrying him beyond the threshold of that order, toward an experience of death that transforms his sadistic scheme into masochistic pleasure. At least with regard to *Travesty*, then, I consider Tobin only partly correct when she identifies the psychoanalytic critic as the “ideal reader” of the Hawkes novel (304). As I shall attempt to show, Hawkes’s identification of himself as a “fetishistic” and “totemic” writer (LeClair 27) is misunderstood unless his portrayal of fetishism and S/M is also read within a counterbalancing framework of anti-oedipal or anti-psychoanalytic theory.

In order to arrive at the fullest understanding of Papa’s plan, it is necessary to see his private apocalypse as an effort to relive not one but *two* instructional events from his past: the formative event which he describes at the end of the novel, and also his S/M encounter with Monique. By making the fusion of these two events the explosive climax

(in both a literal and figurative sense) of his scripted ritual, Papa seeks to synthesize his desires for what he calls “total coherence” and “genuine response,” which he associates, respectively, with poetic order and pornographic abandon. Controlled by the discourses of poetry and pornography, and the various ramifications that these classifications have for Papa, the two events are instructional for the way they shape both the form *and* content of his private apocalypse.

The event which Papa describes as a “travesty” occurs first in his life but is narrated only at the end of the novel. Reaching back to the earliest days of his relationship with Honorine, to a time when he “hardly knew” her, Papa relates how, driving down a busy city street one afternoon, he caught sight of a little girl “more astounding than any [he] had ever seen” (126). The girl was accompanied by an old man who appeared to be her guardian, and who stood waiting on the curbside for traffic to clear, intending to help her cross. According to Papa, the old man was obviously a poet, and sparked in him an immediate dislike so intense that, without making any conscious decision, he began accelerating toward the little girl:

I felt nothing, not so much as a hair against the fender, exactly as if the child had been one of tonight’s rabbits. I did not turn around or even glance in the rear-view mirror. I merely accelerated and went my way.

I do not believe I struck that little girl. In retrospect it does not seem likely. And yet I will never know. Perhaps the privileged man is an even greater criminal than the poet. At any rate I shall never forget the face of the child. (126-27)

As many critics have pointed out, this incident provides Papa with at least the prototypes of those personages he will come to include in his private apocalypse: himself as driver, a poet, and a child. Henri and Chantal duplicate the players in the original scene, despite

the fact that Chantal is Papa's own child and now fully grown, and even though, contrary to the original event, both have now been brought *inside* the car. This last difference between Papa's present endeavour and the formative event is indicative of his deep motivation, according to Allen: "By locking Henri and Chantal in his car, he gains the power necessary to complete the one moment in his past when he had a modicum of control" (173). That Papa finally describes this moment only at the end of the drive, when they are passing Honorine asleep in the chateau, is also significant, for it implies Papa's desire to end his relationship with his wife through a return to its beginnings.

In this conflation of beginnings and endings, Papa establishes the poetic foundation of his private apocalypse in *cruelty*. In an earlier allusion to the formative event, Papa gives advance insight into its significance when he describes it as the one incident which gave his early manhood a "moment of creativity" and a tinge of "cruel detachment" (47). This comes just after a lengthy analysis of Henri's limited virtues as a poet, foremost among which, according to Papa, is his "*mythos* of cruel detachment" (43). By thus laying claim to both creativity and cruelty through the formative event, Papa seeks to align his vision with a concept of artistry that is Sadean in its emphasis on rational categorization and control. Like the ritualized narratives that precede the debauches within Sade's Chateau Silling, Papa's narrative depicts to the minutest detail the planning, execution, and consequences of his private apocalypse before it is lived.²⁸ And in keeping with the Sadean maxim that a libertine must not lose his philosophical clarity in the heat of passion, Papa repeatedly emphasizes that neither pleas for mercy nor his own intense desire to savour the thought of the coming immolation will muddy his

present “clarity,” or cause him to deviate from his plan. As he asks early on, foreshadowing the as-yet untold story of the little girl and poet, “Do you know that now I am not even tempted to look into the rear-view mirror?” (33).

This Sadean aesthetic is intimately related to what Papa calls his propensity for “total coherence, which leads [him] to see in one face the configurations of yet another, or to enter rose-scented rooms three at a time [. . .]” (75). It is this tendency, elaborated into a “theory of likenesses” (97, 121), which enables Papa to describe places he has never seen, and which produces the many doublings or “travesties” within his narrative. These doublings range from the reflection of past events in the present, to the often suspicious similarities between Chantal and Monique, Honorine and Monique, and Henri and Papa.²⁹ Yet the desire for “total coherence” also describes Papa’s obsession with binary pairs: choice/chaos (14), incongruity/truth (20), design/debris (27, 59), ingestion/regurgitation (28). The compulsion to yoke together opposites, and to find “ecstasy” (17) in the fusion of incompatibles, suggests an urge toward mastery that is satisfied only through a detached perspective that first acknowledges but then denies difference. Papa’s ability to “live so close to the edge of likenesses as to be eating the fruit [. . .] while growing it” (75) demonstrates how this pathological desire for control is ultimately satisfied through the poetic device of metaphor. For Papa, poetic sensibility is this capacity to stand both inside and outside one’s experiences, and to establish metaphoric relationships between memories and wholly imagined events. The private apocalypse, as the “physical counterpart” to its own formative vision, is the ultimate expression of this sensibility.

Yet as Papa acknowledges, the private apocalypse will always remain at least

partially beyond his control. As he explains to Henri, his “theory does not apply to exploding gasoline” (57), and it is the inevitable fire of the crash itself which, he knows, will thwart his desire that the debris of his transfiguring event go undiscovered at first.³⁰ Yet far from exhibiting a flaw in his overall plan, this final loss of control over the script of the accident, and the frustration of Papa’s aesthetic desires which it effects, is also an essential aspect of the private apocalypse. Papa’s final surrender to forces which he puts in motion but cannot control has its origins in the S/M scene with Monique--a memory which serves as the second formative event recreated by Papa’s destructive script.

Papa’s memories of his relationship with Monique, his only marital affair, form the longest interlude in the novel, amounting to eleven pages in the middle of the book. Papa begins with a description of “little Monique” as a woman just over twenty years of age at the time of their meeting, whose petiteness interested him because, he says, “it bore out so perfectly an idea that has obsessed me since earliest manhood: that the smaller the woman one regards the greater one’s amazement at the vastness, fierceness, of the human will” (65). As Papa’s memories reveal, the contrast between Monique’s small size and her “staggering” self-assertiveness was heightened by her style of dress and by the ritualistic patterns into which their relationship fell. Papa recalls with delight how, despite the “dangerous” quality of her will, Monique insisted on dressing in revealing clothing, “as if always to confirm her threatened womanhood” (66). And years later Papa continues to marvel at how Monique’s fiery temper could be so easily subdued the moment she sat down in the luxury car he owned at the time. The pattern whereby Monique would hurl invective at Papa in the midst of a crowded street, only to receive,

later, the sharp disciplinary taps of his fork against her wrist in a fine restaurant, suggest a relationship with sadomasochistic proclivities. More than just an extension of his fascination with incongruity, Papa's ongoing interest in Monique and his relationship with her stems from the theatricalized *transformations* which both of them continually underwent from subdued to subduer.

The most significant moment in their relationship, in Papa's view, is one that brings these sadomasochistic and theatrical impulses into an identical focus. According to Papa, Monique's love of old-fashioned lingerie, and her extensive collection of pornography, made her a "natural actress in the theatre of sex" (67). In hindsight, it is this abiding interest in the conventions of pornography that provokes Papa's uncontrolled urge, one rainy night, to become the "sadistic villain," and to spank Monique. In Papa's retelling, the spanking is "a scene that might have come directly from the writing desk or cold and shabby studio on [*sic*] one of our poor, dull, unshaven pornographers" (69). Unpremeditated, it occurred while he and Monique lay nearly nude in her bed, leafing lazily through her collection of erotic photographs. Suddenly, provoked by one of her many childish observations, Papa reports that he grabbed hold of Monique against her will, positioning her squarely across his lap, and began spanking her ruthlessly with a hand now become a "cruel and relentless paddle" (70). Revelling in the pain he caused her, he released Monique only after prolonged cries of protest, at which point, without the slightest trace of remorse, he rolled over on the bed and began masturbating in contemplation of the "abomination" he had just performed. But such satisfaction, he tells Henri, was not to be his, for almost immediately he was assaulted by Monique, who

stripped herself of the only garment she was wearing--a black garter belt--and began whipping him vengefully with it, lashing at his chest, eyes, and even his "great bird." Then, having drawn blood, it was she who promptly laid down on the bed and brought herself to orgasm, while Papa, shocked and wounded, was able nevertheless to feel "a certain relief, a certain happiness for Monique" (74). Papa summarizes the event thus:

Well, it was an instructive night, as you can see. An hour, two hours, and as from nothing a new bond of accord was suddenly drawn between Monique and myself. I learned that I too had a sadistic capacity [. . .]. But what is still most important about that particular and now long-lost night is that it reveals that I too have suffered and that I am not always in total mastery of the life I create, as I have been accused of being. Furthermore it illustrates that I am indeed a specialist on the subject of dead passion.
(74)

The fundamental difference between this formative event in Papa's life and the travesty involving the poet and the little girl is that, while the latter left Papa wondering about the effects of his actions, and whether or not he had hit the girl, in the former, Papa's unpremeditated act provokes an immediate and unambiguous response from Monique. This need for a "genuine response" from the world is, along with his desire for "total coherence," one of Papa's longtime obsessions. As he confesses to Henri about his teenage years, "If the world did not respond to me totally, immediately, in leaf, street sign, the expression of strangers, then I did not exist--or existed only in the misery of youthful loneliness" (85). Significantly, as Papa also relates, this concern with garnering a direct response was concomitant with his interest in "those grainy, tabloidish, photographic renderings of bodies uniquely fixed" (84) that characterized both the pornography of his youth as well as the car crash journals which so fascinated him at the time (21). Just as the event of the travesty gains its significance by establishing the

relationship between a poetic cruelty and his desire for total coherence, so does his spanking of Monique establish a relationship between pornography and his desire for genuine response. Although Papa is unsettled at the thought that his actions were guided by a tawdry S/M script, it is precisely his helpless abandonment to pornographic conventions which transforms the script and the reality in which it is enacted. Beginning as the sadistic villain, Papa ends up in the masochistic position, deriving pleasure both from Monique's role reversal and from his loss of mastery over the discourse of binaries which the spanking *topos* establishes. As a result, the spectacular economy of pornographic S/M becomes, through this scene with Monique, a counterpart to the poetic/narrative economy of cruel detachment which emerges out of Papa's formative travesty. Poetic sensibility, aimed at total coherence through a metaphoric "theory of likenesses," emphasizes the denial of difference through rationalistic and sadistic control. The pornographic aesthetic, however, achieves genuine response by affirming difference through the transformation of sadistic desire into masochistic pleasure.

This, above all, is why the S/M scene with Monique must be viewed as the second formative event guiding Papa's private apocalypse, for it is this event that establishes pornography as the script guiding that "uncontrollable" aspect of the accident itself, which is the *transformation* of one pole of a binary opposition into its opposite. That Papa seeks this kind of transformation in his private apocalypse is suggested by the imagery which links the S/M scene, with its "great bird [. . .] soaring in flight" (71), soon to be struck "dead" (73) by Monique, to Papa's world-building aesthetic:

After all, my theory tells us that ours is the power to invent the very world we are quitting. Yes, the power to invent the very world we are quitting.

It is as if the bird could die in flight. (57)

Silence. The bird in flight. Silence falling between driver and passenger who find themselves deadlocked on a lonely road, deadlocked in their purposes, deadlocked between love and hatred, memory and imagination. (102)

On one level, then, if the travesty of the poet and the little girl provides the *form* for the private apocalypse--establishing its central figures and its ethos of cruel detachment--it is this second formative event that bespeaks its *content*. The S/M scene shows desire revenging itself upon its narrative representations through the very conventions of those narratives. The significance of the event, for Papa, is gleaned from the masochistic pleasure which arises, ironically, out of his decision to follow the pornographic script and play the part of the sadistic villain. Likewise, the private apocalypse, planned according to a sadistic script which emphasizes cruelty and rational demonstration, aims at an ultimately transformative, masochistic pleasure stemming from Papa's violation of the script's constitutive poetic principles. In other words, by acting out the scripted accident, and transforming it into a pornographic spectacle, Papa guarantees on the one hand a genuine response from the world even as he loses that critical detachment necessary for his poetic vision of total coherence. It is this paradoxical conflict between the form and content of the private apocalypse that allows Papa to say of the imminent catastrophe, "what I am doing is cruel, but it is not motivated by cruelty" (125). Like Freud's beating fantasies, the sadistic form of Papa's plan disguises its masochistic content.

That content, in turn, influences the interpretation of the automobile as the privileged object within Papa's destructive fantasy. In her reading of the private apocalypse, Leslie Marx treats the car as a "bachelor machine" in Constance Penley's

sense of the term--“an analogy for the cinematic apparatus as described by (male) psychoanalytic critics” (91). Focusing on Papa’s use of cinematic metaphors, Marx argues that the flaw in his plan is the same as that which Penley identifies in Christian Metz’s reading of the cinematic gaze. Papa will not be able to bring desire and lack into a “deathly embrace” because, as a perceiving subject, his power depends not only on a fetishistic disavowal of (on-screen) absence, but also on a response from the world or the Other which he views (91-92). If we acknowledge, however, that Papa’s need for genuine response is an underlying motivation for the private apocalypse, rather than just an obstacle to it, then it becomes possible to view his fetishistic use of the car in a new light. Instead of serving as a bachelor machine which traps Papa in the “play of presence and absence, desire and the lack on which desire depends” (Marx 90), the car becomes, in the context of Papa’s masochistic motivations, a desiring-machine *à la* Deleuze and Guattari.

In this capacity, the car and its movement provide an insight into the production of desire and its *becoming* which, if one follows *A Thousand Plateaus*, is misunderstood in psychoanalytic readings of fetishism and masochism (259). In psychoanalysis, it is the missing or lost object (the maternal phallus) that endows the fetish with its ability to deny the perception of loss, and to prevent witnessing that loss again. The Freudian scenario of fetish formation defines the fetish as the object enabling the fetishist to remain in a temporal zone in which the perception of loss has both already occurred, and is yet about to occur. Papa is deeply interested in this concept of holding simultaneously to two contradictory propositions, to which fetishism in the psychoanalytic definition attests.

But this interest, as we have seen, manifests itself in the private apocalypse in two separate registers: at the level of form, where it is embodied in his urge toward conflation of binaries, or “total likeness”; and at the level of content, which is embodied in the very different strategy of transformation or “genuine response” which Papa figures as the escape from controlling representations or scripts. At the level of form, which I have associated with Papa’s sadistic, poetic, or metaphoric urge, this interest is developed through the totalizing conflation of origins and ends which the private apocalypse as a script is intended to bring about. Much like the Freudian fetishist who disavows the difference between the sexes through the fetish, Papa treats the end of the ritual, the crash, as a return to origins--hence the notion of the travesty as a “formative moment” implying a linear history. Yet at the level of content, which I have associated with Papa’s masochistic, pornographic, or revolutionary urge, he is concerned with inhabiting that moment “in between” two states, where one state becomes another, which heightens rather than blurs the sense of difference between them. According to Deleuze and Guattari, such an emphasis on “becoming” is fundamentally anti-psychoanalytic because becoming, as an “antimemory” (*Thousand* 294), rejects the focus on origins and ends, and on lack, which are the province of psychoanalysis and its treatment of desire as a theatre of scenes and objects. To respect becomings, then, is to follow desire on its path of deterritorialization, disrupting the codes that attempt to confine it, in a manner much like the reworking of the theatrical pornographic S/M script accomplished by Papa and Monique.

Returning to the private apocalypse, the automobile expresses the fundamental

axiom of Deleuze and Guattari's anti-psychoanalytic conception of desire, which is that desire's *object*, and its *movement* or production, are identical. The projection of the car colliding with the stone wall is an apt formulation of desire as a series of connective linear assemblages, in which one object's flow, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is always cut off by another in a binary relationship (*Anti-Oedipus* 5-6). Within this economy, both the car and the wall are part-objects which, together, serve as the working motor of desiring-production through that "clear burst of desire" (*Travesty* 28) that is the crash itself. Rather than a form of lack around which desire circulates, then, the crash is the very unrepresentable "material" of desiring-production--a materiality without an image or form, which Deleuze and Guattari call the "body without organs." In *A Thousand Plateaus*, this unrepresentable body is described in the negative as "not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit" (149-50). As the unreachable limit of Papa's narrative, the crash becomes the body toward which the masochistic program of the private apocalypse aims. In this, the fact that Papa's foretelling of the event itself makes no explicit mention of pain does not prevent an identification between those "intensities" of transformation which Papa hopes to derive from the crash, and those he received under Monique's whip. As Deleuze and Guattari note, it is not the role of pain in a fantasy scenario that comes first in defining masochism, but the stripping away of the fantasy through a rigorous program which leaves only pain to occupy the body without organs toward which the masochist strives (152). Indeed, it is this crucial difference between interpreting masochism through the fantasy, and rejecting

the fantasy in favour of the body without organs, that distinguishes psychoanalytic interpretation from “antipsychiatric experimentation”:

The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and signifiances and subjectifications as a whole. Psychoanalysis does the opposite: it translates everything into phantasies, it converts everything into phantasy, it retains the phantasy. It royally botches the real, because it botches the BwO. (151)

Papa’s concern that the crash itself not be interpreted, that it remain incomprehensible to “the professional investigator (and reporter) of such events” (24), renders clear the antipsychiatric bent of his program. Of course, as we have seen, his reference to a formative event also implies an interpretive attitude in keeping with the psychoanalytic approach which Deleuze and Guattari reject. It is with reference to these two incompatible approaches, in fact, that another means of explaining the discrepancy between what was earlier identified as the sadistic form and the masochistic content of Papa’s private apocalypse can be formulated. Papa’s planned accident is an effort both to sadistically *represent* and to masochistically *experience* desire, the first through a theatrical *script* which takes repetition or metaphoric duplication of a remembered event as its interpretive framework, and the second through an experimental *program* which takes suspense, or the lived experience of attaining the body without organs as limit, as its impetus. This formulation enables us to speculate that the reason Papa does not link the S/M encounter explicitly to the private apocalypse is because the experimental program must reject such interpretive gestures, even though his own masochist body, traversed by the pain of Monique’s lashes, bears the same material relation to desiring-production as the crash itself.

This is not to say, however, that the car embodies no fetishistic power for Papa, even at the level of the masochistic *program*--only that this fetish must be understood in relation to that program's deterritorializing strategy, rather than as a substitute for loss or lack. A crucial aspect of Papa's plan, reiterated at several points throughout the drive but consistently overlooked by the novel's critics, is its decoding of that "national psychological heritage" (98) which manifests itself in so many of the characters Papa describes--from himself and Henri to Lulu and Papa's one-legged doctor. Papa offers a good deal of insight into that heritage. He divides his fellow countrymen into "coughers and worshippers" (26); he argues that his nation's professional personnel are overcome with "inadequacies or eccentricities" (97); and he identifies as the "two powerful components of our national character, ignorance and willful barbarianism" (99). Yet he reserves his harshest criticism for the fact that, as he tells Henri, "our nation is [. . .] simply not concerned with the needs and imperfections of the individual human body" (93). For Papa, this tendency is manifested in various ways, but it is most apparent in the lack of attention paid to the automobile accident:

And you and I are equally familiar with those occasional large patches of sand which fill half the street, marking the site of one of our frequent and incomprehensible collisions, and around which traffic is forced impatiently to veer--until some courageous driver falls back on good sense and lunges straight across the patch of sand, his tires scattering the sand and revealing the fresh blood beneath. Another commonplace, you say, more everyday life. The triteness of a nation incapable of understanding highway, motor vehicle, pedestrian. But here we differ, because I have always been secretly drawn to the scene of accidents, have always paused beside those patches of sand with a certain quickening of pulse and hardening of concentration. (19-20)

That critics tend to ignore Papa's fetishistic interest in automobile crashes as an index of

wider social and cultural trends is, I submit, a result of the ambiguity of the nation to which Papa refers (it seems to be France, but positive identification is problematized by the mutability of the landscape), as well as the fact that psychoanalysis is typically the predominant framework for analyzing Papa's fixations. The tendency to read perversity and desire through the dynamics of the family--to cut desire off from its social or "molar aggregates"--is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the primary strategy whereby psychoanalysis reduces desire to a theatre of Oedipal figures.³¹ But though the form of the private apocalypse invites such reductionism through its myriad father-, mother-, and child-doubles, Papa's reverence for the "sacred sites" (20) of car crashes suggests that the automobile also serves a deterritorializing function as a fetish which reveals the direct investment of the social by desire.

That function consists, paradoxically, in Papa's reverence for the automobile as the site at which that desire is *reterritorialized*. As Deleuze and Guattari note, desire's deterritorializing movement is always measured by the forms of its reterritorialization, by its internalizing and transformation of the limit (the BwO) which ensures that it cannot be attained. Earlier I identified the crash, for Papa, as the body without organs on the basis of its occupying the unattainable limit of his narrative and experience. But in fact this designation already does violence to the BwO in the strictest sense by incorporating it as such within a representational framework, translating it from an external to an internal limit. It is more correct, in light of Papa's interest in the national characteristics of the car crash, to call the accident the *socius*, or that part of the BwO which serves as the recorder of the movements of desire, and appears, fetishistically, as their quasi-cause. For Papa,

the car crash is sacred because it is proof that the lack of concern for the human body which he criticizes (whether justifiably or not) is no perverse redirection or displacement of desire in the social system, but in fact the direct aim or “external limit” of the system itself. Or, to put this in the terms which Deleuze and Guattari use, the automobile accident records the direct investment of the social by desire which occurs on the BwO, and appears as the cause of that desiring-production. This recording is, already, a reterritorializing of desire itself, which endows the new “artificial” territory with fetishistic power. Hence for Papa,

these small islands created out of haste, pain, death, crudeness, are thoroughly analogous to the symmetry of the two or even more machines whose crashing results in nothing more than an aftermath of blood and sand. It is like a skin, this small area of dusty butchery, that might have been peeled from the body of one of the offending cars. (20)

Endowed with what Papa sees as the cultural denial of the value of the individual body, the automobile becomes a fetish which affirms the power of desire to invest social and cultural structures directly, cutting through those decoys and false signs that attempt to limit desire to the family drama, even as it remains, by virtue of its own artificiality, wedded to them: “You and Chantal and I are simply travelling in purity and extremity down that road the rest of the world attempts to hide from us by heaping up whole forests of the most confusing road signs, detours, barricades” (14).

This quasi-anthropological approach impacts upon the novel’s presentation of history and the historical context of Papa’s private apocalypse. Like Coover, Hawkes limits his presentation of S/M economies to the implements of the ritual itself. But where the paraphernalia of Coover’s master and maid call to mind the conventions surrounding

sadomasochistic practices within a particular historical period, *Travesty* evokes such conventions only within the limited sphere of Papa's memories. The spanking scene with Monique appears to exist in a historical period in which, as Papa indicates, the pornographic conventions of S/M have become stereotyped to the point of being ridiculous. If, however, one is prepared to concede that Papa's private apocalypse is, itself, an S/M practice consisting of both a sadistic representation of desire, and a masochistic program pushing that desire to new transformative possibilities, then it is necessary to examine the role of Papa's chief article of paraphernalia--the automobile itself--as a cultural artifact establishing a historical relationship between the earlier S/M conventions and those new ones which Papa constructs. In this case, part of the problem of understanding Hawkes's presentation of S/M economies is the particular relationship which the novel establishes between that past and a present which is both geographically and historically ambiguous. Any answer to that problem will necessarily require an inquiry into the nature of that magic circle which separates Papa's private apocalypse, and its historical potentiality, from the larger sphere of historical reality that contains it.

Anti-oedipal theory, to which much of my analysis has thus far been indebted, takes us only so far toward a resolution of this problem. Certainly, the lack of detail regarding geography and history in Papa's narrative, and the fact that the entire landscape threatens, at times, to collapse into fantasy, can be taken as a reflection on the simultaneous deterritorializing and reterritorializing of desire which the private apocalypse effects. Papa's identification of the automobile and the car crash as fetishistic recorders of the movement of desire at the level of the social is entirely appropriate here,

given the car's overdetermined status as a Western cultural icon. Furthermore, Papa makes very clear that his plan has important temporal consequences. Very early on, he describes the car as "a clock the shape of a bullet" (16), and soon after, he tells Henri in detail about the unending war he wages against Honorine's antique clock (34-35). Much like the narrator of Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," Papa is distressed almost to the point of madness by the ticking of this clock, which, paradoxically, seems loudest to him when he surreptitiously silences it. Concluding this anecdote, he tells Henri, "our present situation is like my wife's old clock. The greater the silence, the louder the tick. For us the moment remains the same while the hour changes" (35). If we recall that one of the central metaphors Papa uses to describe the transformative space *between* remembered and imagined worlds is "Silence. The bird in flight" (102), it is tempting to read Papa's masochistic program as an effort to exist in a kind of transhistorical moment. This effort bears a close resemblance to Deleuze and Guattari's description of the *haecceity*, a moment of becoming which "has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination; it is always in the middle" (263). As a kind of temporal cross-section of desire outside the time of *chronos*, or "history-memory systems," the haecceity serves, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, as the basis for an alternative temporal mode called *aeon*.³² Yet although this model adequately describes one aspect of Papa's temporal objectives, it cannot address the fact that Papa seeks more than merely a personal *escape* from history or memory. As his repeated mentions of a "national character" suggest, his "death drive" aims at a revision of those social values which he criticizes--a revision which perhaps begins by bringing about the cessation of their historical development.

Of course this begs the question, as yet unaddressed, as to what specific nation or national history Papa is referring to. Critics who have refused to accept France as the geographical setting of *Travesty* have typically done so as part of an effort to portray the novel as a metafictional ride through Papa's unconscious. My effort to read the automobile as a kind of quasi-anthropological fetish precludes ruling out consideration of the novel's specific geographical and historical setting in this way. And while it is impossible to say for certain why Papa's criticism of his national culture never refers directly to France, the role of the automobile in his plans paves the way for some informed speculation.

The basis for this speculation, which I offer by way of a conclusion to my analysis of Hawkes's novel, are two texts which share an important thematic link with *Travesty*. Both would have been available to Hawkes at the time of its writing, although whether or not he actually consulted them is immaterial to the framework I will construct here. The first text is a 1934 lecture by Gertrude Stein, entitled "Portraits and Repetition," in which Stein advances a theory of literary portraiture which focuses on the relationship between repetition and emphasis. The lecture opens with an exposition of the idea that American experience is definable as a felt intensity of "movement" so great that it requires no backdrop of history, or "generations," against which to be viewed (99). For Stein, this pre-eminently American lack of historical consciousness inspires new possibilities in literary endeavour by freeing the artist from the constraints of plot, or "what is happening," since these things always depend on memory and repetition. The main thesis at which the lecture eventually arrives is that truly "important" literature

renders repetition impossible, since “if anything is alive, there is no such thing as repetition” (104). What makes this theory interesting in light of Hawkes’s novel is that Stein uses the image of the moving automobile as her central metaphor, and explains the incompatibility between repetition and literature through the model of a lone artist’s voice speaking to and answering itself:

One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening. It is really that that makes one a genius. And it is necessary if you are to be really and truly alive it is necessary to be at once talking and listening, doing both things, not as if there were one thing, not as if they were two things, but doing them, well if you like, like the motor going inside and the car moving, they are part of the same thing. (102)

For Stein, this program of simultaneous talking and listening is essential to the artist of the modern period because it wards off memory, enabling him or her to avoid the confusion of “two times”: that of an insistent, cinematic present and a repeated or repetitious past (108). The artist who hopes to capture the essence of the modern must forego the reportage of what has already happened, or what is about to happen, in order to submit himself or herself to the rigours of creating a continuous present: “As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my business my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going” (117). As Stein emphasizes throughout her lectures of the thirties, American literature will inevitably dominate the twentieth century because American life is naturally closest to that experience of a continuous present, divorced from historical context, which defines great modern art.

Before returning to Hawkes, I want now to detour through a second text, this one

published almost forty years after Stein's lecture, and three years prior to *Travesty*. J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, widely regarded as a paradigmatic postmodernist novel for its portrayal (on Baudrillard's own authority) of a Baudrillardian "hyperreal,"³³ also presents in many ways a sinister realization of Stein's vision of American cultural hegemony. In Ballard's novel, Stein's metaphoric use of the moving automobile as an image of life-affirming and autonomous artistic creation is transformed through the scene of the crash into the symptom of a "death drive" permeating all of Western culture. The aim of this drive, in the eyes of the novel's hero, Vaughan, is a worldwide "autogeddon": "millions of cars hurled together in a terminal congress of spurting loins and engine coolant" (*Crash* 16). In the world of *Crash*, American art and culture, particularly of the cinematic variety praised by Stein, has indeed taken over, to the extent that the only markers of historical context are references to Vaughan's central obsession, the screen actress Elizabeth Taylor. As a postmodern version of Stein's artist-hero, Vaughan cruises the highways of London with his camera in search of authentic car crash footage, which he shares in the form of erotic and "scientific" studies with a core of fellow accident devotees. But in *Crash*, unlike in Stein's lecture, representation merges with reality to the point that any distinctions between past and present, or repetition and insistence, lose their validity. Vaughan repeatedly "rehearses" famous crashes that have already occurred, and encourages his followers to study films of crash-test dummies so as to emulate their movements in the accidents he devises for them. Eventually, even these rituals fail as attempts at personal expression. As Baudrillard observes, the proliferation of desire expands to such an extent for Vaughan and his followers that even fetishism and S/M lose

their specificity as perversions (“Ballard’s” 314-15). If we can trust Ballard when he reports that his mission as a writer is to depict the “fall of the American empire” (Goddard 11), then *Crash*, with its depiction of an American cultural “manifest destiny” pushed to an apocalyptic brink, must be taken as one of the central achievements in that project.

To introduce Stein and Ballard here is not to imply that Hawkes’s *Travesty* was intended as a direct reply to their work. As a student of modernist literature, Hawkes may well have been familiar with Stein’s text, and it is almost certain, given the close proximity in publication between *Travesty* and *Crash*, that Hawkes was at least aware of Ballard’s novel while writing his own.³⁴ In the present context, however, mention of these texts is relevant first and foremost because they provide a framework within which to situate Hawkes’s use of the automobile as a cultural object bearing recognizable cultural and literary codes, which impact on his novel’s treatment of S/M and its relation to historical narrative. Ballard takes pride in considering *Crash* “the first pornographic novel based on technology” (“Introduction” n.p.), and this designation, set in opposition to Stein’s lecture on literary greatness, makes it possible to consider their works as two formal and thematic extremes between which Hawkes’s portrayal of the automobile as a cultural fetish can be situated. As we have seen, Papa’s private apocalypse embodies a contradictory relationship between its form and content, the former associated with a poetic sensibility or representation, and the latter with pornographic experience. As I have attempted to show, the former is intimately associated with Papa’s sadistic ideal of “cruel detachment,” while the latter exhibits a transformation of desire through the living

out of a spectacular script which I have described as a masochistic program. If we now align this conflict with the opposing poles of Stein's modernist aesthetic on the one hand, and Ballard's postmodernist porn on the other, Papa's use of the automobile as a fetish receives illumination as a practice with a dual historical aim: first, it attempts to represent an anti-historical or Steinian sensibility as a precursor to the kind of apocalyptic society depicted in *Crash*; and, second, it seeks to thwart that historical development. Thus Papa describes the moving car as a guarantee of timelessness, in keeping with Stein's metaphor, but offers a dark warning about the underlying motives which attend this hurried flight from history:

[L]istening to music is exactly like hurtling through the night in a warm car: the musical experience, like the automobile, guarantees timelessness, or so it appears. The song and road are endless, or so we think. And yet they are not. The beauty of motion, musical or otherwise, is precisely this: that the so-called guarantee of timelessness is in fact the living tongue in the dark mouth of cessation. And cessation is what we seek, if only because it alone is utterly unbelievable. (22)

To glory in timelessness, in progress without limit or the endless road with which modernity is associated, is also, perhaps unconsciously, to seek an end to history. Whether that cessation is characterized as the apocalyptic "cultural death-lust" permeating the world of *Crash* (Ruddick 357), or the quieter "waning of historical affect" by which Jameson and others characterize the postmodern, it is clear that Papa takes his plan seriously as a reflection of national, if not global, obsessions. As such, its rootedness in a fundamentally American cultural experience is clear. For Baudrillard, the Steinian concept of a perpetual present goes hand in hand with perpetual simulation, and makes America the "original version of modernity" next to which Europe is only a

“dubbed or subtitled version” (*America* 76). Accordingly, to understand America requires one to traverse it by car, for only speed can simulate “the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of surface over the profundity of desire” that is the essence of its culture.³⁵

Although Papa’s nation cannot be identified for certain, there is good reason, given his fixation on the car, to accept France as the geographical setting of *Travesty*. In her historical study of France’s transformation into an “American-style mass culture” (10), Kristin Ross identifies the automobile as the privileged object signifying both the modernization and Americanization of France in the 1950s and 1960s: “In France, at least, the car marked the advent of modernization; it provided both the illustration and the motor of what came to be known as the society of consumption” (39). Papa’s destructive use of the automobile can be taken, in the French historical context, as a reaction to Americanization and a perceived “American” end to history and desire—an end which he finds foreshadowed in the lack of concern which his nation exhibits toward the human body.³⁶ The murderous nature of Papa’s plan already indicates just how deeply influenced he has been by this prevailing callousness (whether he knows it or not), as does his youthful juxtaposition of pornographic magazines and car crash studies. But Papa is able to maintain, at times, an ironic distance from that attitude. Compare his fascination with the accident site, already quoted, to that of *Crash*’s narrator:

At my feet lay a litter of dead leaves, cigarette cartons and glass crystals. These fragments of broken safety glass, brushed to one side by generations of ambulance attendants, lay in a small drift. I stared down at this dusty necklace, the debris of a thousand automobile accidents. Within fifty years, as more and more cars collided here, the glass fragments would form a sizable bar, within thirty years a beach of sharp crystal. A new race

of beachcombers might appear, squatting on these heaps of fractured windshields, sifting them for cigarette butts, spent condoms and loose coins. Buried beneath this new geological layer laid down by the age of the automobile accident would be my own small death, as anonymous as a vitrified scar in a fossil tree. (56-57)

For the characters of Ballard's novel, there is no longer any critical space to which one can retreat in order to question or contest the system and its values. Indeed, if there is any revolutionary sentiment in *Crash*, it consists not in an attempt to thwart an anonymous death at the hands of technology, but rather in Vaughan's attempt to endow the inevitable with at least some degree of symbolic resonance. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard argues that, in a system given over wholly to simulation, no revolution which attempts to alter the real can succeed, since the real is itself produced and governed by the system. Instead, the only way to disrupt such a system is to present it with that symbolic gift, death, which must be repaid through its own defeat and collapse (36-37). The autogeddon which Vaughan envisions, and hopes to bring about through the education of his disciples, can be read as such a strategy--a planned global death, or "unilateral exercise of the *gift*" (*Symbolic* 36), that will force the system to relinquish its hold on power. That autogeddon is foreshadowed in Vaughan's own spectacular highway death, which becomes the last revolutionary act available in a system that has pre-empted all other symbolic alternatives.

Papa's world is not yet so far gone, and his private apocalypse can be taken as a symbolic gift intended to prevent the system from reaching that stage of development where only a *public* apocalypse--an autogeddon--will suffice to challenge it. It is on this level that his effort to capture a transhistorical moment takes on a revisionist, rather than

merely escapist, function in relation to history. Papa's plan re-institutes death as an internal limit within the system, but where "death" does not refer to self-destruction (since that crash must remain "outside" the realm of Papa's narrative), but to the movement of desiring-production itself. In Deleuze and Guattari's model, it is schizophrenic catatonia, or the body without organs as the "zero state" of intensities, that lends itself as a model of death; the *experience* of death is then the movement of desiring-production on that BwO. Hence: "The experience of death is the most common of occurrences in the unconscious, precisely because it occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming, in every intensity as passage or becoming" (*Anti-Oedipus* 330). Papa's private apocalypse is a "schizophrenization" of death which drives toward the zero intensity of the body without organs in order to stave off that "zero degree of culture" by which Baudrillard describes the hyperreal (78). Or, to return to Jameson's model of the postmodern, Papa takes himself as the schizophrenic limit in order to prevent the generalization of schizophrenia as a cultural norm. Situated, it would appear, in that "pre-history of [France's] postmodernism" (Ross 10) dominated by images of the automobile and its benevolent timelessness, Papa intervenes in the process of cultural modernization by re-activating the automobile as a masochistic desiring-machine, rendering it the site of a *becoming* in which the human body and the cultural fetish are forced into a symbolic equivalence that the system, for its own survival, attempts to disguise.

This does not, of course, imply any moral endorsement of Papa's actions. Here it is worthwhile to reiterate and reinforce Deleuze and Guattari's own warning about too readily affirming the value of masochism as a strategy for reaching the body without

organs: “That there are other ways, other procedures than masochism, and certainly better ones, is beside the point; it is enough that some find this procedure suitable for them” (*Thousand* 155). Of course where murder is concerned, the “suitability” of any approach must be denied. But then again, there is no murder in the pages of *Travesty*--only the possibility of such, and as I have attempted to show, much of the significance of the private apocalypse is derived from its never reaching its destructive end. In this, Hawkes’s depiction of S/M economies, and their relation to the death drive, differs fundamentally from Coover’s text. Where *Spanking the Maid* shows narrative order and the S/M ritual finally undone by desire, *Travesty* literalizes the concept of a death drive in order to foreground its validity as a theoretical structure linking sadism and masochism, while also opening that structure to new political purposes. Mediating, in Hawkes’s novel, between a pseudo-familial sphere within the car, and a vague but nonetheless suggestive cultural world without, Papa’s death drive is both instinct *and* ritual, desire *and* narrative. As a result, it renders that reversal by which Freud traces the development of primary masochism available for social, as well as psychic, historical revision.

Notes

1. By using the letters S/M I intend to denote, here and throughout this chapter, that complex of images and theoretical problems surrounding both sadomasochistic practices in their spectacular variety, as well as the clinical versions of sadism and masochism, the distinctions between which I shall address shortly. The "/" in S/M is also intended to connote both the close historical and theoretical relationship between sadism and masochism as well as an urge to enforce some distinction between them, in keeping with the efforts (also to be discussed hereafter) of many theorists to develop separate definitions of the terms.
2. I will go so far as to venture the opinion that the conflation of Marxian and Freudian fetishism, espoused by some cultural critics as a means of recovering the buried history of contemporary simulacra, seems at times to have been preempted by the advertisers themselves as a defense mechanism against just such decoding. Here again Jameson's analysis of the Warhol shoes is pertinent, since it demonstrates how the artistic portrayal of commodification as process already necessitates this conflation of Marxian and Freudian fetishes. One need not accept, however, Jameson's conclusion that this conflation leaves us with nowhere left to turn in the analysis of the postmodern art-object-as-commodity. As I argue in Chapter Two, this "dead end" is a key impetus in the shift from critical to affirmative accounts of fetishism.
3. In *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud places these perversions in direct competition on the basis of their inherent interest to the analyst. Of fetishism, he writes, "No other variation of the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest as this one. . . ." (153). And he introduces the section devoted sadism and masochism as "[t]he most common and most significant of all the perversions" (157).
4. It is important to point out that Deleuze's attack on the concept of sadism and masochism as two terms of a binary opposition also extends to pre-Freudian sources--most notably to Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1885). Krafft-Ebing, who coined the term "masochism" from the work of Sacher-Masoch, was also explicit about the relationship between sadism and masochism:

The perfect counterpart of masochism is sadism. While in the former there is a desire to suffer and be subjected to violence, in the latter the wish is to inflict pain and use violence.

The parallelism is perfect. All the acts and situations used by the sadist in the active role become the object of the desire of the masochist in the passive role [. . .]. (*Psychopathia* 190-91)

Another pre-Freudian source alluded to by Deleuze is Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1903), which describes sadism and masochism as "complementary emotional states" (33).

5. For a fuller discussion of Bersani's argument, see Chapter One of this text.
6. Worth noting, however, is the fact that Deleuze and Guattari do not lend unqualified valorization to masochistic practices, as some of their critics suggest. Summarizing the strategies by which masochistic ritual effects a temporary separation between desire and pleasure, they write: "That there are other ways, other procedures than masochism, and certainly better ones, is beside the point; it is enough that some find this procedure suitable for them" (*Thousand* 155). For a more detailed summary of the social and political implications of masochism in Deleuze and Guattari, see Siegel 18-19. For more on the body without organs and its relationship to social and personal desire, see Chapter Two of this text.
7. Deleuze goes so far as to say that there can be no masochism without fetishism (*Coldness* 30). He also distinguishes between masochism and sadism in part on the basis that, in the latter perversion, the fetish plays only a secondary role (29). This use of the fetish to describe the differences between masochism and sadism has earlier precedents. In her essay, "Must We Burn Sade?", Simone de Beauvoir distinguishes between the "magical" world of the masochist, and the "rational" world of Sade, on the basis that the masochist necessarily fetishizes objects, whereas Sade disdainfully strips any mystery from his human and material "tools" (26-27).
8. Curval conveys this doctrinal point over supper in the Chateau: "Never ought fuck be allowed to dictate or affect one's principles; 'tis for one's principles to regulate one's manner of shedding it. And whether one is stiff, or whether one is not, one's philosophy, acting independently of the passions, should always remain the same" (535).
9. In fact, even the content of what takes place in the Chateau has its origins in the outside world, since the story-tellers' tales are all truthful accounts of acts committed in society at large.
10. As Cope observes, Coover's novel "is a pastiche of nineteenth-century styles from the literature of pornography" (55).
11. That the maid is a working class labourer is suggested by the fact that the master "pays her well" (27) for her services.
12. In what has become a classic contemporary confession of sadomasochistic proclivities, Daphne Merkin's autobiographical *New Yorker* sketch, "Unlikely Obsession," is centered on the irony of her lifelong desire to be spanked, given her pride in considering herself an "intellectually weighty, morally upright" woman (99). It is therefore fitting that she cites Coover's novel as her favourite piece of S/M literature, since in many ways *Spanking the Maid* flies in the face of the the rationalistic rhetoric of consensuality proffered by the "S & M philosophes" Merkin criticizes (112).
13. Wright mentions this convention only briefly in the context of her article on Coover. For a more detailed study, see chapter eight of Apter's *Feminizing the Fetish*, "Master

Narratives/Servant Texts: Representing the Maid from Flaubert to Freud.” Apter makes a very brief mention of *Spanking the Maid* at the end of this chapter. Her reading is somewhat problematic, however, in that it ignores the novel’s complex shifting of perspectives, and charges a single male narrator with a scopic/narrative “fixation” of the maid.

14. Inability to determine which of the novel’s two perspectives is the dominant one is reflected in the critical literature. Wright believes that “what actually dominates is the hysterical discourse of the maid” (404). In his initial assessment, Varsava is of the opinion that “[t]he novella accentuates the role of the master slightly more than that of the maid” (“Another” 236).

15. This is, in essence, the approach taken by both Cope and Ziegler. Cope describes *Spanking the Maid* as “an allegory about writing within genres, styles, limits. And in it Coover uses the least imaginative genre [pornography] to force a sense of the final need for imaginative conquest of limits” (57). Ziegler reduces Coover’s novel to “an extended metaphor for the relationship between author and reader,” in which even the problem of domination and submission becomes only a means for ensuring the hermetic survival of the novel genre (50-51).

16. Coover’s use of repetition, in particular, to define the maid’s perspective is in keeping, both formally and thematically, with his earlier short story, “The Babysitter.” As Josh Cohen points out in his reading of that story, “repetitions both ‘ritualise’ the narrative patterns of the story and draw attention to a disjunctive temporality in which progress gives way to contradictory simultaneity. The past of Coover’s story is projective rather than linear, directed by potentialities in mutual tension, rather than a univocal and authoritative perspective” (20).

17. I borrow this term from McClintock, who uses it to describe things like doorknobs and windowpanes, which enforce a public/private divide. While my use of the term incorporates this definition (as seen in my discussion of the garden doors), I also use the term to connote an object, such as the master’s bed, which polices *ontological* boundaries between dream and reality.

18. In a detailed study of Freud’s theory of the dream-work, Lyotard takes issue with what he understands to be Lacan’s description of dreams as discourses created through the same operations as those of speech (30). Pushing to its logical consequences Freud’s statement that, “[a]t bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking” (*Interpretation* 506, note 2, emphasis his), Lyotard makes a convincing case that the four processes of the dream-work each depend upon “a spatial dimension which is precisely excluded from the linguistic system” (22). This dimension--the territory of the *figure* as the material, plastic surface of the dream-thoughts--ensures that the manifest content of the dream is not a discourse but “a kind of non-writing; the space in which it moves is that of an object, not a text” (47).

19. That the maid should be forced consciously to face these objects is fitting given that, according to Freud, it is secondary revision alone among the processes of the dream-work that corresponds to the functions of waking thought. It should be pointed out, however, that for Freud, secondary revision does not come "after" the other processes--as my reading of Coover suggests--but rather occurs concomitantly with them.

20. Only in the novel's final pages, when the distinction between the bedroom and the outer world, and between dream and reality, has broken down completely, is the master found walking in the garden "outside."

21. It is for this reason that the master maintains a decidedly divided attitude toward his fetish, betraying a perverse fascination with the configurations of welts and weals on the maid's buttocks and yet considering it, on the whole, a "dismal spectacle" (43).

22. This subversion of traditional object-choice in the (psychoanalytic) economy of desire leads me to disagree with Varsava's conclusion that *Spanking the Maid* is ultimately a "blank page on which to write our own views on gender relations" (*Contingent* 140). For Varsava, any hope of changing the gender stereotypes at the heart of the novel must be projected by the reader, since neither the master nor the maid escape the trap of believing that "man is essentially superior, woman inferior" (140). I would contend, however, that their unconscious choice of fetish objects does reveal an aspect of their characterization antithetical to gender stereotypes.

23. In support of theoretical projects to define female fetishism, McClintock argues against psychoanalytic readings that would reduce prominent (especially Victorian) cultural fetishes to phallic substitutes: "Reducing all fetishes and all cross-dressers to a single genesis narrative founded in phallic ambiguity prevents one from accounting for the differences among subversive, reactionary or progressive practices" (67).

24. Some critics prefer to call the driver the "privileged man," in keeping with the distinction he draws between himself and Henri, the "lower class" poet.

25. This sentiment had been expressed by Hawkes even earlier, in a brief article in *The Massachusetts Review*, where he writes, "The writer who maintains most successfully a consistent cold detachment toward physical violence [. . .] is likely to generate the deepest novelistic sympathy of all, a sympathy which is a humbling before the terrible and a quickening in the presence of degradation" ("Notes" 787).

26. Thus O'Donnell writes that "Hawkes's tendency is constantly to assault the reader, to demand that he take the fictional journey" (2). Similarly, Conte observes that "The reader [. . .] becomes a victim of the driver's monologue, another passenger whose pleading remains unheeded and unrecorded throughout the terrifying ride" (121). And Leslie Marx argues that Papa's speech is ultimately addressed to "the reader as captive spectator" (91). In some cases, these readings have led to the buttressing of Greiner's original thesis that the events and characters in the novel may only be imaginary constructs. Berryman points out that while the geographical setting appears to be

southern France, based on Papa's mention of La Roche, "the landscape is more mental than physical, and the narrator even admits that he has never been to the one village that he does name" (645).

27. For additional, and highly interesting, accounts of why *Travesty* qualifies as a postmodern novel, see Unsworth and Conte. Unsworth defines Hawkes's postmodernist aesthetic as the practical desire to shape his fiction in accordance with the dominant critical readings of it--a desire bred of employment within the academy. Conte aligns Hawkes with the postmodernism of Burroughs's "cut-ups" through Papa's overriding interest in "design and debris," or the fusion of chaos and order.

28. The fact that, according to Papa, Honorine lies sleeping in a chateau throughout the narrative has led several commentators to draw comparisons between the setting of *Travesty* and the gothicism of Poe's tales, particularly "The Fall of the House of Usher" (see Baxter 873, Conte 121, and Marx 86). It is, however, just as apt to locate the inspiration for Papa's mental landscape in Sade.

29. These doublings are wide-ranging and have received ample treatment in previous critical discussions; I will therefore mention only those that reify the opposition, central to my analysis, between poetic and pornographic sensibilities. Papa and Henri are repeatedly compared on the basis of their common understanding of poetic "cruelty," such that Papa likens them to a "crow" and "canary," respectively (40). At the very end of the novel, Papa recites two lines of Henri's poetry which he says he enjoys so much he "might even have written them [himself]" (127). The female characters in the novel are, on the other hand, all unified in their common association with pornography. Posing nude for Papa, Honorine becomes the subject of his "rare photographic study" of the female form (67); Chantal earns the childhood title "porno brat" for her constant interruption of her parents' sex life (55); and Papa describes Monique as "the living example of all the uninhibited nudes I courted in the pornographic magazines of my own late and isolated boyhood" (67).

30. In his wish that the crash not be discovered, Papa shows a further affinity with Sade, who considered his *120 Days* to be lost forever. It did not resurface until well over a century after its composition.

31. Hence Papa's reference, at various points, to a "theatre of sex" with which virtually every character in the narrative is associated. Both Monique and Honorine are described as "natural actresses" in this theatre (67, 108), and Chantal's sexual awakening is depicted in the on-stage "Queen of Carrots" game she plays while vacationing with her parents (115-19). The various signs of Papa's symbolic castration also belong to this "theatre," and include, most prominently, his missing lung and his temporary blinding under Monique's whip. For more on images of castration in the novel, see Rosenzweig 160 and Marx 85-88.

32. For more on haecceities and the temporal mode of *aeon*, see Chapter Two of this text.

33. Baudrillard's 1976 essay on *Crash*, in which he treats the novel as a fictional representation of his concept of simulation and the hyperreal, had an immediate and very positive effect on critical reception of Ballard's work in the academy. According to Luckhurst, Baudrillard's essay is the inspiration for an entire school of Ballard criticism focusing on its cyberpunk and postmodernist aspects (xvi).

34. Given this proximity, the fact there have been, to my knowledge, no critical analyses comparing *Crash* and *Travesty* is a good indicator of just how differently these two novels have been approached by critics. *Travesty* tends to be read as a metafictional reflection on the workings of its narrator's unconscious, while *Crash*, also told from the first-person perspective, has become, as mentioned above, a canonized example of that blending of science fiction and postmodern "realism" called cyberpunk. These divergent critical interpretations have resulted in one commonality, however, which is the downplaying of S/M as a significant discourse in both novels.

35. Baudrillard crosses paths with Stein on another occasion, when he observes that American life is "spontaneously fictional, since it transcends the imaginary in reality" (*America* 95). And to throw Ballard back into the mix, he has expressed deep admiration for Baudrillard's *America*, calling it "an absolutely brilliant piece of writing, probably the most sharply clever piece of writing since Swift [. . .]" ("Response" 329).

36. Papa's use of the car to create a kind of "timelessness" can also be seen as a subversive *reterritorializing* of the cultural affirmation of the automobile's ability to legitimize progress by serving as an image which reconciles past and future. According to Ross:

Any initial glance at the intermediate "moment" of the car--its marketing, promotion, the construction of images and markets, the conditioning of public response, the discursive apparatus surrounding the object, in short, its advertising--reveals a discourse built around freezing time in the form of reconciling past and future, the old ways and the new. This is particularly important in a culture like that of France where modernization, unlike in the United States, is experienced for the most part as highly destructive [. . .]. (21)

CHAPTER SIX
“LONGING ON A LARGE SCALE”:
DELILLO’S *UNDERWORLD*

This is magic. Sure--but not necessarily fantasy.

--Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

Of the various novels analyzed in this study, *Underworld* is perhaps the one which most forcefully asserts the power of fetishism as a historical practice. DeLillo's encyclopedic rendering of the Cold War era in American history strongly implicates commodity and anthropological fetishism in the widespread paranoia of the period, methodically elucidating their impact on historical consciousness and representation. Re-assessing both the origins and the ideological underpinnings of postmodernism in the United States, DeLillo paints a picture of post-World War II American culture dominated by a powerful collective longing for security which fixates, ironically, on the bomb. The nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, and the military-industrial complex which drives it, are portrayed as intimately related to the postmodern levelling of historical depth by the media and information technologies. Yet even while it dissects the fetishistic fantasies at root of “official” Cold War history, DeLillo's novel also presents fetishism as a practice capable of disrupting and reordering that history. Tracing in fits and starts the biography of a quasi-mythical object, the home run baseball hit by Bobby Thomson in the famous Dodgers/Giants World Series semi-final of 1951, *Underworld* suggests the possibility of challenging dominant representations of history through absorbed meditation on its contingent, material traces.

In choosing to organize his novel around the quest for a lost object, DeLillo is by

no means alone among contemporary American authors. Similar structures define some of the most celebrated “maximalist” novels in the postmodern American canon.

Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* famously depicts Tyrone Slothrop’s effort to recover a specially-modified (and perhaps mythical) V-2 rocket in the months following the end of World War II. More recently, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, set in the near, “post-postmodernist” future, unfolds around the hunt for an elusive, fatally addictive film known only as “the Entertainment.” Furthermore, DeLillo himself has experimented with the quest format in earlier, shorter novels which, like these longer works, devote considerable attention to the historical and cultural dynamics of obsession, addiction, and fetishism. *Running Dog* (1978), for example, focuses on the complex web of political and underworld plots surrounding the search for, and acquisition of, a pornographic film supposedly made inside Hitler’s underground bunker during the final days of the Führer’s life. And another early DeLillo novel, *Great Jones Street* (1973), explores the connections between fame and obsession from the perspective of Bucky Wunderlick, “hero of rock’n’roll,” who tries to hide from his own life as a public figure and ends up sheltering a supply of an eagerly-sought after narcotic “product” with the rumoured ability to destroy the speech centers of the human brain.

Yet where *Underworld* breaks significantly with DeLillo’s earlier, less ambitious quest novels is in the particular tension it establishes between the effort to criticize and affirm the cultural fascination with historical artifacts and secret plots. In a 1990 interview, DeLillo discusses, in hindsight, his goals in writing *Running Dog*:

What I was really getting at in *Running Dog* was a sense of the terrible acquisitiveness in which we live, coupled with a final indifference to the

object. After all the mad attempts to acquire the thing, everyone suddenly decides that, well, maybe we really don't care about this so much anyway. This was something I felt characterized our lives at the time the book was written, in the mid to late seventies. I think this was part of American consciousness then. (DeCurtis 302)

What DeLillo describes here as the sudden loss of interest in the acquired object is portrayed in the deflated ending of *Running Dog*, in which the Hitler bunker film, finally screened for questers and reader alike, is revealed to have no pornographic content at all. The on-screen appearance of Hitler impersonating Charlie Chaplin leads the film's potential distributor, an erotic art collector named Lightborne, to pronounce it "a disaster" (237). Likewise, *Great Jones Street* ends with a revelation about its central object that is unsatisfying to those who have sought it out. Bucky Wunderlick suffers a "double defeat" (264) when, attempting to make a final break with the music business and the media, he consumes his stash of the "product" only to discover that its speech- and language-retarding effects are not permanent. According to DeLillo scholar Mark Osteen, the denial of narrative satisfaction in each of these novels helps to demonstrate a theme emphasized in much of DeLillo's early fiction, which is that the desire to participate in or read quest plots, given their inevitable compression and reification of history into tell-tale objects, is often fascistic in and of itself ("Marketing" 153).¹ By contrast, *Underworld*, though perhaps no more accommodating in its provision of conventional narrative satisfaction than these early texts, nevertheless differs from them by its unwillingness to condemn those compelled to seek out the past through material objects.² For characters like Marvin Lundy, Nick Shay, and Charles Wainwright, historical consciousness has become tied to the elusive materiality of the Thomson

baseball because historical representation in its more traditional, narrative forms has been rendered impossible in the cultural climate in which they live. While *Running Dog*, according to DeLillo, concerns itself with the final loss of interest in the object that accompanies the unbridled passion for consumption in 1970s America, *Underworld*, with its much broader historical scope, portrays both the underside and the “end” of that passion, which is the transformation of consumption’s left-overs--waste in all its forms--into new objects of desire.

Nevertheless, if *Underworld*, as a quest novel, breaks with DeLillo’s earlier fiction, its simultaneous affirmation and criticism of American consumer practices (what Robert Miklitsch would call a “critical-affirmative” perspective) is very much in keeping with DeLillo’s later work, especially his best-known novels, *White Noise* (1985) and *Libra* (1989). The pervasive power which these novels attribute to contemporary media, and their reluctance to posit any vision of the world or the subject that is not at least partially dependent on those media forms, has spawned a debate about whether there is any coherent oppositional politics to be found in DeLillo’s work. Often, this debate dovetails with that concerning the essential modernism or postmodernism of DeLillo’s aesthetic. Few analyses of *White Noise*, for example, have failed to make at least cursory use of the theories of Baudrillard or Jameson; but the question as to whether the novel is thoroughly postmodern in the sense of Jameson’s de-politicized “blank parody,” or whether it is, instead, a “slyly modernist meditation on postmodern themes” (King 69) has yet to be settled.³ *Underworld* has thus far only intensified these debates, offering as it does both a rigorous explication of the origins of postmodernism in American media

and culture, and repeated suggestions about the oppositional and critical potential of avant-garde art. DeLillo himself has weighed in on the side of a modernist interpretation:

When people say *White Noise* is post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see *Underworld* as post-modern. Maybe it's the last modernist gasp. I don't know. (Williams 32, quoted in Nel 725)

Philip Nel has used these comments in support of his argument that *Underworld* is DeLillo's "most 'high modernist' novel to date" (725). According to Nel, DeLillo's practice of linguistic "photomontage," which mimics Dadaist and surrealist aesthetic strategies, establishes an oppositional artistic practice which defies the Baudrillardian and Jamesonian configurations of postmodernism (727-31). Yet Timothy L. Parrish, while acknowledging that *Underworld* resists the idea that "there can be no difference between aesthetic production and commodity production" (713), still finds the novel to be essentially postmodern. For Parrish, DeLillo's aesthetic strategy, like that of the various artist figures (Klara Sax, Moonman 157, Sabato Rodia, Lenny Bruce) within the novel, is postmodernist in the sense described by Linda Hutcheon, depending and drawing upon the cultural forces which it contests.

In the two-part analysis which follows, I argue that DeLillo's novel, while maintaining continuity with the specifically Jamesonian and Baudrillardian configurations of postmodernism emphasized in *White Noise* and *Libra*, nonetheless reveals an oppositional historical practice sometimes considered to be incommensurable with those models. This practice is not confined to the efforts of the novel's artist-figures, however, as most critics have assumed, but is also revealed in the efforts of those who attempt to track down and retrace the fragmented history of the Bobby Thomson

baseball which is threaded throughout the novel. The conviction, held to different degrees by Nick Shay and Marvin Lundy, that all of Cold War history is implicated in a single, lost object, is what Baudrillard would call a “fatal” advancement on the comparatively banal historical thinking of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*, who reads history as a narrative in which destiny, and his meeting with President Kennedy on November 22, are controlled by invisible and unknowable cultural forces. In this sense, the differences between *Libra* and *Underworld* suggest an aesthetic evolution in which Baudrillard’s “fatal strategies” come to occupy a central role in DeLillo’s work, alongside his much-discussed depiction of the hyperreality of contemporary America. While *Libra* depicts its central character as a simulacrum “constituted by the new realm of images disseminated by the movies and other mass media” (Johnston 202), *Underworld* offers no consistent center of consciousness, and revolves, instead, around an object.

In the first part of my analysis, I offer a detailed reading of the most studied portion of *Underworld*, the prologue, which many critics interpret as DeLillo’s effort to redefine the origins of postmodernism in the United States. My reading complexifies this interpretation by positing that DeLillo’s prologue is also an inquiry into the tactics by which those origins are posited in ideological and representational terms. Relying on Slavoj Žižek’s concept of the ideological fantasy-scene, I argue that DeLillo’s choice of J. Edgar Hoover as the predominant fictional filter through which to reveal the events of the baseball game, and the news of the second Soviet atomic test, is motivated by Hoover’s well-known status as a manipulator of information, and his lesser-known role in the United States’ development of the hydrogen bomb. Through Hoover, I suggest, DeLillo

reveals that Cold War history, and the difficulty of understanding and representing it, are driven by the fusion of two widespread cultural tendencies: the fetishism of the bomb, and the proliferation of (and paranoid need for) information that substitutes for knowledge.

In the second portion of the chapter, I analyze the specific effects of these cultural tendencies on subjective historical consciousness, as revealed in the remainder of DeLillo's novel. Focusing first on *Underworld's* depiction of the military-industrial complex and the unique new work environments to which it gives rise, I argue that the rumours and paranoias which proliferate in these environments are representative of what Arjun Appadurai calls "specialized mythologies" of commodity flows, which elevate commodity fetishism to a new level of historical mystification. I then suggest that, in contrast to these mythologies, the search for the Thomson baseball provides an alternative fetishistic strategy for historical representation. By insisting on the material reality of the baseball even in spite of the myths of its disappearance, the novel's questers, like its artist figures, foreground and even recuperate the fantasy-structures through which Cold War ideology perpetuates and justifies itself.

"The Game and Its Extensions": Postmodernism's Fantasy Scene

The relationship between historical representation, collective longing, and ideology in *Underworld* is forcefully established in the novel's prologue, "The Triumph of Death." Here DeLillo recreates the historic final game of the 1951 World Series semi-final between the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers--a game as famous for its

unexpected end (Bobby Thomson's ninth inning home run brought the Giants back from a 4-1 deficit to win the pennant) as for the fact that it was played on the same day, October 3, as that on which the United States announced its detection of the Soviet Union's second atomic blast.⁴ DeLillo's depiction of the game assesses the significance of this historical coincidence by developing the implications of aesthetic strategies already latent in newspaper accounts of the time. The tabloid New York Daily News immediately dubbed the Thomson homer "The Shot Heard Round the World," placing the pennant victory on a par with the significance of the atomic explosion. And the New York Times for October 4, 1951, juxtaposed news of the baseball game and the Soviet test in equally-sized columns on the paper's front page, suggesting an historical equivalence between the two events.⁵ Returning to the scene of the baseball game itself, "The Triumph of Death" attempts to describe both how and why such apparently overstated historical importance might be attributed to a baseball game.

Several critics have observed that DeLillo's portrayal of the Dodgers/Giants game locates the origins of American cultural paranoia, and postmodernism itself, at a point prior to that identified by his earlier fiction. In *Libra*, and perhaps as early as his first novel, *Americana*, DeLillo suggested that it was the Kennedy assassination which served as the defining moment of postmodern American cultural sensibility.⁶ This idea is introduced early in *Underworld*, in a discussion which takes place during a game between the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants in the spring of 1992. Nick Shay, Brian Glassic and Simeon Biggs explain to Jane Farrish, a BBC producer unacquainted with baseball, the history of the two teams they are watching. Commenting on the fact

that both the Los Angeles and San Francisco teams are descendants of the New York-based Dodgers and Giants of the 1950s, their talk eventually gravitates toward the historical importance of the 1951 National League pennant final. For all three men, the game at the Polo Grounds takes on a significance comparable to that of the Kennedy assassination; yet it is set apart from that event by the powerful feeling of community it inspired at the time:

When JFK was shot, people went inside. We watched TV in dark rooms and talked on the phone with friends and relatives. We were all separate and alone. But when Thomson hit the homer, people rushed outside. People wanted to be together. Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something. Some wonder, some amazement. Like a footnote to the end of the war. (94)

The difference in public reaction to the Thomson homer and Kennedy assassination--one spawning an immediate outpouring of communal identity, the other isolating people with the technological substitutes for community--is later used to explain the Thomson homer's persistence as a cultural memory:

The Thomson homer continues to live because it happened decades ago when things were not replayed and worn out and run down and used up before midnight of the first day. The scratchier an old film or audiotape, the clearer the action in a way. Because it's not in competition for our attention with a thousand other pieces of action. Because it's something that's preserved and unique. (98)

For these men, looking back at both events from a post-Cold War perspective, the Thomson home run retains its original historical significance because it derives from an era that is, in some sense, pre-technological. Compared to the endless repetition and dissection of the Zapruder film, the Thomson homer is unspoiled by analytical cynicism, and therefore crystallizes a historical period in which history had not yet become

dependent on the technologies of its preservation. *Underworld*, according to some critics, relocates the cultural origins of postmodernism by revealing the naiveté of this view. DeLillo's prologue contradicts Shay, Glassic, and Sims in advance by showing that the Thomson homer is experienced, even at the time, within a technologized framework of nostalgia and paranoia like that which characterizes the Kennedy assassination.⁷

I want to suggest, however, that reading DeLillo's recreation of the 1951 pennant final in this way too readily simplifies DeLillo's project in the "Triumph of Death." For while Glassic, Shay, and Sims certainly idealize the game, their perspective is also representative of a broader, post-Cold War penchant for retrospection which *Underworld* thematizes at several points. Klara Sax, the novel's chief artist figure, articulates the sense of loss at root of this revisionist urge in the chapter which immediately follows "The Triumph of Death": "Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don't even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well" (76). In this context, Glassic's retrospective description of the Thomson homer as a "footnote to the end of the war" (94) is an effort to compensate for the feeling of unease which accompanies the loss of Cold War binarisms--an unease which Klara likens to "postwar conditions without a war having been fought" (69-70). The fantasy which these men share about the 1951 game derives its power from the unsettling sense that, after the Cold War, all of history seems condemned to the left-over status of a footnote. And while *Underworld* certainly demystifies, through "The Triumph of Death," the distance which their nostalgic fantasy erects between the technologized present and the pre-technologized past, it does not

demystify the *need* for that distance as essential to the formation of a new symbolic system out of the ashes of the old. Quite the contrary, even as DeLillo's prologue cuts through the myth of the game as an event untouched by the paranoias and nostalgias associated with the Cold War and postmodernism in the United States, it nevertheless confirms the game's *formal* function as what Slavoj Žižek calls an ideological "fantasy-scene," preserving the illusion of a time prior to the "worn-out" present.

According to Žižek, ideology, like any symbolic system, necessarily conceals a gap in the causal chain which leads up to it. This gap or "missing link" is detectable in the fantasy-structure which a system mobilizes in order to justify and preserve itself. In psychoanalysis, which provides the paradigmatic example of the fantasy-structure, the missing link is the subject itself:

The basic paradox of the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy consists in a kind of time loop--the "original fantasy" is always the fantasy of origins--that is to say, the elementary skeleton of the fantasy-scene is for the subject to be present as a pure gaze before its own conception or, more precisely, at the very act of its own conception. The Lacanian formula of fantasy denotes such a paradoxical conjunction of the subject and the object *qua* this impossible gaze: the "object" of the fantasy is not the fantasy-scene itself, its content (the parental coitus, for example), but the impossible gaze witnessing it. (*For They Know* 197)

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the symbolic order is defined by a retroactive causality in which the subject perpetually "fills out the void" of its origins, obscuring the fact that the symbolic structure presupposes itself in a logical vicious circle (203). Likewise, in ideology, according to Žižek, the function of the fantasy-object is to conceal, via the retrospective rewriting of past events, the gap in logic which occasions it. This process, which involves the attempt to re-incorporate previous traumatic events into the new

symbolic network, is essentially *narrative* in nature:

In ideology, too, the fantasy-construct is a way for the subject to fill out the “missing link” of its genesis by assuring its presence in the character of pure gaze at its own conception--by enabling it to “jump into the past” and appear as its own cause.

The crucial point here is that the synchronous symbolic order fills out the void of its “origins” by means of a *narration*: fantasy has, by definition, the structure of a *story* to be narrated. (211)

DeLillo’s fictional recreation of the baseball game--a recreation which sets out to “fill the gaps” in the official historical record--allegorizes the structure and workings of the ideological fantasy-scene itself. Yet “The Triumph of Death” is more than mere allegory, for in its effort to explain the means by which the gap in historical significance between the baseball game and the announcement of the Soviet atomic test is bridged by the media accounts of the time, it also implicates the specific technologies of the postmodern era in the self-perpetuating strategies of Cold War ideology.

True to Žižek’s model, *Underworld*’s prologue gives the sense, on one level, that its “object” is not so much the description of the October 3, 1951 baseball game as the creation of a subject-position defined by its role as a *witness* to that event. This is suggested, first, in the emphasis placed on the reader’s status as an observer of the fictional scene. The novel begins with a direct address to the reader, “He speaks in your voice, American [. . .]” (11), and as the prologue unfolds, reminders of the extra-diegetic relationship between reader and text interrupt the narrative at various points. One effect of these interjections is to call attention to the historical significance of the game even as it is unfolding. The feeling evoked by several of the narrator’s more provocative asides (“it’s called an Indian burn, remember?” (48); “Don’t tell me you don’t love this move”

(57)) is that, even on first reading of the text, one is engaged in an act of *remembering*.

The illusion of knowing in advance not only the outcome of the historic game, but even the minutest details invented by DeLillo, heightens the sense of inevitable teleology that attends any historical fiction.

Interestingly, the sense of a foregone conclusion to the game is shared by many of the game's diegetic spectators. One of DeLillo's most daring fictional innovations is his characterization of several members of the Polo Grounds crowd as in some way already aware of the game's historical significance. This foresight is especially compelling when attributed to real historical figures. Early on, the game's announcer, Russ Hodges, reflects presciently that "everybody who's here ought to feel lucky because something big's in the works, something's building" (15). Later, similar sentiments are expressed by J. Edgar Hoover, Jackie Gleason, and Frank Sinatra, who observe the game as a group from the bleachers. As Joseph Walker observes, the mere presence of such celebrity figures contributes to the historical aura of the event: "Their very presence implies that the game is already in some sense history, already on film" (451). I would add, however, that the combined effect of DeLillo's strategies for emphasizing the game's historical aura also lends it the form of a fantasy scene, in which the historical significance of the game is "explained" through the presupposition of an audience already aware of its outcome and meaning. "The Triumph of Death" identifies the gaps in the official historical narrative of the game as the space in which its symbolic power resides. And as in the psychoanalytic version of the fantasy scene, DeLillo positions the gaze of the subject--here the collective gaze of the crowd--in that constitutive space:

There are things that apply unrepeatably, muscle memory and pumping blood and jots of dust, the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play.

And the crowd is also lost in this space, the crowd made over in that one-thousandth of a second when the bat and the baseball are in contact. (27)

Of course, any baseball game lends itself to this type of fantasy treatment because baseball is a spectator sport, and because it has always been a repository of powerful American nationalist myths.⁸ But DeLillo's prologue is ultimately concerned with much more than the specific ideologies of baseball, or with the formal structure of fantasy-scenes in general. For the long-term significance of this particular game derives, in part, from its historical coincidence with the announcement of the second Soviet atomic test. That coincidence, sharply emphasized by the front page of the New York Times on October 4, 1951, places the game at a defining moment in the heightening of Cold War tensions between the United States and America. In turn, the fantasy structure attributed to the game by DeLillo's prologue also serves to represent the means by which American Cold War ideology perpetuates itself, through the assumption of a collective American subject shot through with desires firmly rooted in the specific technologies of the time.

In order to see how the baseball game becomes a constitutive fantasy-scene for American Cold War ideology, it is necessary to probe more deeply into the aesthetics governing DeLillo's creation of the "narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play." It is important to recognize, first, that in mapping the historical linkage between the baseball game and the Soviet test, DeLillo breaks significantly with the example set by the New York Times story which inspires him. Rather than attempting to translate into fictional form the Times's graphical juxtaposition of the two events (a

strategy which DeLillo has used often in the past),⁹ “The Triumph of Death” confines itself to a focus on the scene unfolding at the Polo Grounds. The link between the game and the atomic explosion is established, instead, through the imaginative projection of the prologue’s central historical character, J. Edgar Hoover, who alone among the spectators at the game is aware of the Soviet test. It is in DeLillo’s choice of Hoover as the medium for this historical nexus that the specifically ideological significance of the game as a fantasy scene is revealed. Contributing to the symbolic aura of the reconstructed game by virtue of his status as a historical figure, Hoover also serves as a historical and symbolic junction for the two tracks along which Cold War ideology, according to *Underworld*, will be propelled: the unquenchable thirst for information, and the escalating arms race with the Soviet Union.

Hoover’s role as a chief representative of Cold War paranoia, and of DeLillo’s historiographic methodology, has not gone unnoticed in critical treatments of *Underworld*. Parrish argues that DeLillo’s artistic project is to “out-Hoover Hoover” by appropriating the FBI director’s invasive, connective aesthetic, while subverting his politics (700). And Knight maintains that DeLillo’s explanation of cultural paranoia relies, unconvincingly, on the portrayal of Hoover’s personal pathologies (818). Yet what neither of these readings points out, for all their attention to Hoover as a master manipulator and prophet of Cold War history, is the fact that DeLillo characterizes Hoover as symptomatically *under*-informed about the existence of the Soviet bomb. To readers aware of the historical Hoover’s role in assessing the state of Soviet atomic readiness, the reaction of his fictional counterpart to news of the second Soviet test is

surprising, and runs counter to the critical view that his access to secret information grants him superior historical knowledge of the era. I suggest that Hoover's overreaction to the news of the explosion, in light of his well-known obsession with secrets and information, is the first indication in *Underworld* of an even more powerful cultural obsession constraining historical representation during the Cold War: the fetishism of the bomb.

By October 3, 1951, there were few people in the United States less likely to be shocked by news of a second Soviet atomic test than J. Edgar Hoover. After the first such test, conducted on August 29, 1949, and detected by the Americans almost immediately, Hoover, as FBI director, played a significant role in assessing Soviet atomic capability. While Truman's public announcement of America's loss of atomic monopoly was deliberately tailored to off-set public paranoia (his speech of September 23, 1949 referred to an "atomic explosion" rather than a bomb), American insiders were never in doubt as to the military implications of the Soviet test (Herken 39). The confession of Soviet spy Klaus Fuchs early in 1950 not only confirmed beyond any doubt that Joe-1 was a bomb, it also revealed that the Soviets had built the bomb using stolen American designs. Yet although the historical Hoover, who personally led the FBI's investigation of Fuchs, advised prominent presidential advisors that the Soviets might already be *ahead* of the Americans in developing certain aspects of their nuclear armoury (Herken 50), Hoover's reaction in *Underworld* indicates that he has remained, until now, at least partially in denial about the existence of the Soviet bomb:

It seems the Soviet Union has conducted an atomic test at a secret location somewhere inside its own borders. They have exploded a bomb in plain

unpretending language. And our detection devices indicate this is clearly what it is--it is a bomb, a weapon, it is an instrument of conflict, it produces heat and blast and shock. It is not some peaceful use of atomic energy for home-heating applications. It is a red bomb that spouts a great white cloud like some thunder god of ancient Eurasia. [. . .]

He knows this is not completely unexpected. It is their second atomic explosion. But the news is hard, it works into him, makes him think of the spies who passed the secrets, the prospect of warheads being sent to communist forces in Korea. He feels them moving ever closer, catching up, overtaking. (23-24)

Hoover's divided attitude about the Soviet bomb is reflected in this passage, which gives the impression that, despite his knowledge of traded atomic secrets, Hoover is still attempting to convince himself of the bomb's existence. Indeed, his fixation on the details of "heat and blast and shock" seems like an effort to refute Stalin's official statement that Russia was pursuing, at the time, only peaceful uses of atomic energy (Ziegler and Jacobson 202).¹⁰ Hoover is a figure who, early on, demonstrates the extent to which information can actually eclipse knowledge, creating its own "connections" which substitute for, rather than reveal, truth. Later in the novel, Hoover will remark on the fact that dossiers, as empty receivers of information, create "a deeper form of truth, transcending facts and actuality" (559). In "The Triumph of Death," DeLillo's characterization of the FBI director foreshadows the effect that this "deeper form" will have on historical awareness and subjectivity in the Cold War era. At the top of the information chain, Hoover is exposed before anyone else to the endless stream of data which characterizes the postmodern, and which threatens to reduce the subject to the schizophrenic status of a dossier.

DeLillo's text does not imply, however, that this transformation in the ability to perceive historical truth is the result of immersion in information alone. Hoover's

paranoid fear that the Russians are “moving ever closer, catching up, overtaking,” brings his fictional characterization in line with the historical Director’s fear of Soviet superiority in the field of weapons development. The implication, given the date (October 3, 1951) on which the baseball game occurs, is that Hoover’s disavowal of the Soviet bomb is itself a facet of his desire for accelerated development of even more powerful nuclear technologies just then taking place in the United States.

Chief among the historical Hoover’s concerns about Fuchs’s espionage was the possibility that, based on the information he had gathered about thermonuclear fusion from American scientists, the Russians might be able reach the next evolutionary step in nuclear weaponry--the hydrogen or “Super” bomb--before the Americans. In a telephone call to the White House on February 1, 1951, Hoover went so far as to tell Sydney Souers of the National Security Council that the Soviets could have “gotten going on the hydrogen bomb even before the other” (quoted in Herken 50). Hoover’s call played an important role in speeding political and scientific support of the hydrogen bomb project in the United States. Although president Truman had publicly announced the American project to develop the Super in January 1950, its progress had been stalled by conceptual and technical difficulties, as well as by the opposition of many of the president’s chief scientific and political advisors (among them J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had overseen development of the atomic bomb). The substance of these reservations ranged from military complaints that work on the hydrogen bomb would detract from the stockpiling of atomic weapons, to moral indignation at the supposed need for a weapon which would produce destruction many orders of magnitude greater than that already demonstrated by

the fission-driven atomic bomb.¹¹ Hoover's suggestion that the Russians might already be well on the way to producing this weapon, however, did much to sweep away the practical and moral objections to its development in the United States. With the Soviet detonation of Joe-2 in September, 1951, official opposition to the American Super program was effectively silenced. The Panda Committee, the construction team charged with building the hydrogen bomb, met for the first time on October 5, 1951 (Rhodes 482), the day after the appearance of the New York Times issue which juxtaposed news of the Thomson homer and Soviet test.

In selecting Hoover as the medium through which to link the Thomson "shot" and the Soviet test, DeLillo thus brings into play not only Hoover's legendary status as a gatherer and manipulator of information, but also his role in bringing to light a new, altogether more dangerous form of technological fusion: the hydrogen bomb. Set at the moment of America's undivided commitment to this technology, DeLillo's prologue encourages us to implicate the historical Hoover's enthusiasm for the Super in the divided attitude about the Soviet atomic test exhibited by his fictional counterpart. Hoover's disavowal of the fact of Russian atomic readiness in DeLillo's text can be read, in light of Žižek's model of the "missing link" of ideology, as an effort to re-integrate a previous traumatic encounter--America's loss of atomic monopoly--into the new ideological system of the thermonuclear age. As Žižek observes, this process ultimately reveals much more about the present symbolic system, and the conditions of its maintenance, than the contents of the earlier event it seeks to re-integrate: "If the trace of an old encounter all of a sudden begins to exert impact, it is because the *present* symbolic

universe of the subject is structured in a way that is susceptible to it" (202, *italics his*). In the new world heralded by the Super, American national security will be defined not in terms of a monopoly on weapons of mass destruction, but through an ethos of deterrence based on an unlimited *escalation* in both the power and number of fusion weapons. Hoover's fear of the Russians "catching up" and "overtaking" is an early sign of the definitive Cold War paranoia that will result in a decades-long arms race between the United States and Soviet Union--an arms race which literalizes ideology's fantasy structure through its justificatory rhetoric of "closing the gap" between one side's real, and the other's imagined, level of military preparedness.¹²

Hoover's paranoia should thus not be read, *pace* Knight, as DeLillo's "clumsy psychologizing" (818) of Cold War history in terms of a single character's troubled psyche. *Underworld* opens with the statement, "Longing on a large scale is what makes history" (11), and Hoover provides the first indication that the privileged object of that longing, in Cold War America, is the hydrogen bomb. As DeLillo's novel will suggest at various points, the bomb is the predominant cultural fetish around which Cold War ideology and history is organized. Like the psychoanalytic fetish, the Super takes hold in the American imagination by enabling continued belief in a briefly abandoned proposition: the idea that national security resides with the possession of massive destructive capability. At the same time, however, the new bomb also serves as a testament to the irony and inadequacy of such a concept. The popular term that attaches itself to the weapon--"the bomb"--foregrounds the inefficacy of its solution to the problem of national security, conflating as it does the old with the new, while also

obscuring the morally-conflicted historical progression from the atomic to the thermonuclear age. Deriving its ideological power from a promised return to the fantasmatic security of atomic monopoly, the Cold War fetishism of thermonuclear weapons mimics the form and functioning of the hydrogen bomb itself, which, in its classical design, uses a fission bomb as a “sparkplug” to light its more powerful fusion reactions.¹³

Moreover, DeLillo’s characterization of Hoover at the baseball game sheds light on the fact that it is the bomb which indirectly conceals the gap in Cold War ideologies of nationalism, through its ability to forge communities out of fear. As Hoover recognizes, standing among the crowd at the game, “All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction” (28). I suggested earlier that baseball provides an ideal forum for analyzing ideological fantasy in America because it is a spectator sport steeped in nationalistic myths. One of the most enduring of these myths is that of baseball’s inclusivity, its status as an institution blind to differences in race or class. In “The Triumph of Death,” DeLillo reinforces this myth in several ways. An improbable friendship springs up during the game between Cotter Martin, an African-American boy who “gate-crashes” his way into the game, and Bill Waterson, a white construction-firm owner. And social distinctions based on celebrity and wealth also appear to vanish during the game, as Gleason and Sinatra cavort with the crowd around them. Yet what Hoover’s ruminations emphasize in the midst of this happy levelling of differences is that all myths of community, however

idealized, pale in comparison with those established under the threat of annihilation. The hydrogen bomb, beloved of American military strategists for its ability to “kill a nation,”¹⁴ unites people of all classes, races, and political outlooks through the utter lack of discrimination with which it kills.

This, ultimately, is what makes “The Triumph of Death” more than a mere allegory of ideological fantasy structures. If technology, as *Underworld* maintains, “makes reality come true” (177), and if “[a]ll technology refers to the bomb” (467), DeLillo’s prologue suggests that Cold War ideology is historically unique by virtue of the technological efficacy with which it perpetuates itself, from credible threats about the end of civilization, down to the likening of a baseball game to an atomic test. The front page of the October 4, 1951 New York Times, with its fusing together of historically incommensurable events, bespeaks the extent to which the Super bomb’s unique technology will constrain, literally and figuratively, the possibilities of historical representation and dissent in Cold War America. The split headline in the Times necessitates one’s adoption of the spatial, and definitively postmodern, mode of historical analysis described by Jameson:

The occasional flash of historical understanding that may strike the “current situation” will thus happen by the well-nigh postmodern (and spatial) mode of recombination of separate columns in the newspaper; and it is this spatial operation that we continue to call (using an older temporal language) historical thinking or analysis. [. . .] The “solution” to a juxtaposition [. . .] no longer opens up historiographic deep space or perspectival temporality of the type of a Michelet or a Spengler: it lights up like a nodal circuit in a slot machine (and thus foreshadows a computer-game historiography of the future even more alarming). (374)

Jameson’s notion of a future “computer-game historiography” is realized in the epilogue

of DeLillo's novel, "Das Kapital," in which the fusion technology of the hydrogen bomb is explicitly identified with the informational medium of the internet. *Underworld* ends with a visit to the H-bomb homepage, where the paranoid Sister Edgar, dead now but still sentient in the afterlife, watches replays of "[e]very thermonuclear bomb ever tested" (825) until she becomes hyperlinked to J. Edgar Hoover:

Shot after shot, bomb after bomb, and they are fusion bombs, remember, atoms forcibly combined, and even as they detonate across the screen, again and again, there is another fusion taking place. No physical contact, please, but a coupling all the same. A click, a hit and Sister joins the other Edgar. [. . .] The bulldog fed, J. Edgar Hoover, the Law's debased saint, hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar--a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information.

Everything is connected in the end. (826)

Edgar's fate, in the movement from *Underworld's* prologue to its epilogue, reflects on the extent to which community and even paranoia will be pre-empted by the network of informational connections modelled on fusion technology. The notion of an "internet community" becomes, in the context of this progression, a fantasy-offspring of Cold War ideologies rooted in the fetishism of the bomb. The effects on historical consciousness are obvious. In a world in which subjectivity is reduced to coded information, the revelation that "everything is connected" (repeated, as we shall see, by several characters in the novel) loses any pretense to deep or secret knowledge. Instead, it reiterates the formal functioning of the fantasy itself.

Something of this flattening of historical representation is evident in "The Triumph of Death," at the moment when the Thomson home run and the atomic explosion finally come into contact. As Thomson's baseball enters the stands at the Polo Grounds, Hoover projects himself imaginatively to the scene of the Soviet test:

[A]nd he thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of theirs, liturgical and grave. What secret history are they writing? There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets that the bomb inspires, things even the Director cannot guess--a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world--because these plots are only now evolving. This is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared force of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert--for every one of these he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein. (50-51)

Of primary importance in this imaginative reconstruction of Joe-2 is the fact that the historical significance of the test remains unknown to Hoover. Just as, earlier, Hoover's insider information about the bomb's existence was unable to dispel his faith in the possibility of peaceful Soviet atomic research, here Hoover's secrets once again place him at a remove from historical truth. But this is so, I suggest, not only because history's variegated plots "are only now evolving," but also because historical representation is being constrained by the technological devices--both destructive and informational--that will drive those plots. Hoover's paranoid invocation of countless, unknowable secret plots is less an indication of his historical foresight than a symptom of the fact that information saturation (access to "every festering secret in the Western world") obstructs, rather than facilitates, historical consciousness. Following a pattern which recurs throughout *Underworld*, and which I shall discuss in greater detail shortly, Hoover seizes upon a myth of "underground" history as a substitute for an older mode of historical thought foreclosed by the symbolic, media-driven fetishism of the bomb.¹⁵

Thus while "The Triumph of Death" is inspired by the yoking together of the

Thomson homer and Soviet test in the New York Times, it does not attempt to “solve” this juxtaposition by reverting to a deeper historical logic that would explain or demystify it. Instead, DeLillo’s prologue “goes through the fantasy” of a historical description which renders transparent the nature of the ideological presuppositions entailed in closing the gap between these two events. As a result, DeLillo’s narrative can be taken to perform an essentially dialectical task, in Žižek’s terms:

What the dialectical presentation renders is not the closed circle but the very process of inversion--itself contingent--whereby the external, contingent presuppositions are retroactively “posited,” reordered within a synchronous circle: *in other words, the very process that generates the illusion of a closed circle*. And what accordingly, dialectical presentation unmasks is the “fetish” of an Origin by means of which the circle (the synchronous system) endeavours to conceal its vicious character [. . .]. In this sense we could say that, ultimately, dialectical analysis is nothing but a repeated “going through the fantasy” which keeps the vicious character of the circle unconcealed. (*For They Know* 213, italics his)

In revealing the fetish *of* the origin, and the fetish *at* the origin, of Cold War ideology and postmodernism in the United States, DeLillo’s prologue also offers a model strategy through which several of the novel’s characters will attempt to regain a sense of historical consciousness they feel to be lost. Parallelling Hoover’s imaginative identification between the baseball game and the Soviet test is the similar, invented equivalence which *Underworld* establishes between the bomb and the Thomson baseball as cultural fetishes. It is to this equivalence, and the counter-strategies enabled by it, that I now turn.

Cold War Mythologies and a Fatal Object

The prologue of *Underworld* details both the origins and the self-perpetuating strategies of Cold War ideology in America, and suggests that it is the bomb that will

become the defining fetish of postmodernity. At the same time, however, it also sets in motion another object--the Thomson baseball itself--which occasions its own, much more limited history. The relationship between these two historical streams is foregrounded in the chapter which immediately follows "The Triumph of Death." Here Klara Sax, artist and theorist of Cold War binarisms, explains the motivations underlying her latest project, which is the painting of a vast number of de-commissioned B-52 bombers at an installation in the Arizona desert. Her statement of purpose locates her work in relation to the cultural, literary, and philosophical legacy of the bomb:

We all tried to think about war but I'm not sure we knew how to do this. The poets wrote long poems with dirty words and that's about as close as we came, actually, to a thoughtful response. Because they had brought something into the world that out-imagined the mind. They didn't even know what to call the early bomb. The thing or the gadget or something. [. . .] But I'm making a whole big megillah out of this. What I really want to get at is the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing. (76-77)

Latent in the contrast which Klara establishes, at this early point in the novel, between the bomb as an object which "out-imagines the mind," and her own quest to find the ordinary life behind the thing, is the strategy whereby *Underworld* attempts to describe an alternative mode of historical consciousness. That strategy is DeLillo's own artistic rendering of the cultural life of the Thomson baseball, from its first entry into the stands of the Polo Grounds at the end of the prologue, through to its final resting place in the hands of Nick Shay, one of the novel's key protagonists. Klara's statement suggests that attention to the life of an ordinary thing, or what Igor Kopytoff would call its "cultural biography," may open up representational options foreclosed by the ideological fetishism of the bomb.

The historical potential of constructing cultural biographies of things is best revealed, in DeLillo's text, through comparison with the specific effects on historical consciousness brought about by the bomb as fetish. Earlier I suggested that Hoover's divided attitude about the Russian test was indicative of larger American cultural longings associated with Cold War ideology and postmodernism, and I argued, through a relatively loose application of the Freudian definition of fetishism, that the chief object of those longings was the hydrogen bomb. To be sure, DeLillo's text supports this reading in more than just a metaphorical sense, by emphasizing the specifically sexual register of the bomb's significance at numerous points. From the aggressive femininity of "Atomic Jayne" Mansfield (484), to Lenny Bruce's theory that the bomb is a device designed by whites to prevent miscegenation (547-48), to Louis T. Bakey's Vietnam mantra, "First we fuck them, then we bomb them" (616), nuclear imagery in *Underworld* serves to disavow both historical and sexual difference.¹⁶ Yet the bomb, as a cultural fetish, is much more than this. Located at the heart of the military-industrial complex, it is also a very powerful commodity in its own right, giving rise to problematics of value better analyzed with reference to Marx than Freud. And for this reason, the effects on historical consciousness produced by the bomb exceed those indicated by any single theory of fetishism--whether psychoanalytic, Marxian, or anthropological--that might be used to describe them.

In order to assess the representational problems posed by this widespread cultural fetishism, I suggest that the bomb in DeLillo's text be treated as a privileged example of what Robert Miklitsch calls a "commodity/body/sign." Miklitsch's concept, which

brings together the sexual and commodity fetish as well as Baudrillard's fetishism of the code, is built around the recognition that, in late capitalism, the production and consumption of the sign subsumes the classical Marxist distinction between use-value and exchange-value. Where classical political economy, according to Miklitsch, establishes an equivalence between the body and use-value, on one hand, and between exchange-value and the commodity on the other (Miklitsch 15), the postmodern body is always already mediated by the commodity. The result is that, in advanced capitalist societies, sign-value becomes a simulacrum of use-value, radically problematizing the reconstruction of linear relationships between production and consumption.¹⁷ DeLillo's novel, with its attention to the fantasy-structures of Cold War ideology, foregrounds the problem of identifying any material origin prior to the production of sign-value, or any stable opposition between use- and exchange-value, production and consumption, or even commodities and waste. Indeed, one of the most powerful legacies of the arms race in the United States, as depicted in *Underworld*, is that the relationship between production, consumption, and waste disposal is rendered fully as mysterious as the inner workings of the bomb itself. If, as Saltzman maintains, the central theme of DeLillo's novel is the emergence of material waste as an occasion for religious awe ("Awful" 306), that awe must be understood as a substitute for any reasoned appreciation of the ends of commodity production. Worshipping waste does not grant unmediated appreciation of the material; instead, it is an indication of the thorough *de*-materialization that characterizes contemporary commodity flows, converting even the material left-overs of production and consumption into new forms of sign-value.

In DeLillo's novel, the consequences of de-materialization on historical awareness are emphasized in the widespread tendency to mythologize the unrepresentable relationship between production and consumption. As Arjun Appadurai points out, every culture endows commodity flows with "culturally constructed stories and ideologies" (48). But in cases where subjects feel systematically alienated from knowledge of the origins or ends of production, it is not uncommon for these narratives to become "specialized mythologies" (Appadurai 48) which endow one aspect of the commodity flow, or the entire flow itself, with a degree of fetishistic power which far exceeds that "naturally" attributed to commodities in a capitalist system. In *Underworld*, so prevalent is this subjective alienation from knowledge of the global systems of production and consumption that specialized mythologies become a frequent response to, and substitute for, the loss of historical consciousness.

Not surprisingly, given its status as the dominant cultural fetish of the period, the bomb spawns numerous mythologies among those involved in the multi-tiered, and highly segregated, stages of its design, production, testing, and deployment. Matt Shay's top secret work in the Pocket, an underground military installation in New Mexico, consists, ostensibly, of developing safety mechanisms for nuclear weapons. Yet even after having worked in the Pocket for five months, Matt remains confused about the exact nature and significance of his labours--a confusion he shares with his co-workers:

There were people here who didn't know where their work ended up, how it might be applied. They didn't know how their arrays of numbers and symbols might enter nature. It could conceivably happen in a flash.

Everything connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line. This caused a certain select disquiet. (401)

In Matt's case, disquiet manifests itself both in an unreasoning awe of the bomb, and in growing anxiety about the moral implications of his work. He daydreams about the outlawed spectacle of the atmospheric blast, "the visionary flash of light, the critical mass that will call down the Hindu heavens" (458), yet finds himself contemplating the rumours spread by his co-worker, Eric Massingale, about the dark legacy of atomic testing in America. Eric's tales of the "downwinders," replete with exacting details about radiation sickness, stillbirth, and official denial, are regarded with suspicion by both men, and Eric confesses to telling them only for their "existential burn" (406). Nevertheless, though Eric and Matt refuse to believe the rumours, neither is able to dismiss them entirely, and the stories soon become disturbing not only for their subject matter, but for their ability to persist in the imagination independent of belief or documentary proof. Born of compartmentalization within "one of those nice tight societies that replaces the world" (412), these myths take hold, DeLillo's text suggests, because they fill a gap in historical consciousness that necessarily arises when one is systematically alienated from knowledge about the effects and products of one's labour.

More than filling a gap, however, such specialized mythologies also erode one's ability to challenge official history through imagined alternatives. This erosion is made evident in the "existential burns" which Eric's stories leave on Matt. Listening to Eric's ramblings while stoned at a bombhead party, Matt experiences a moment of true paranoia, a horrifying awareness of "some deeper meaning that existed solely to keep him from knowing what it was" (421). Yet although this feeling causes Matt to believe that he is on the verge of an important historical revelation, it quickly becomes clear that his

paranoia is actually an emotional substitute for, rather than a representation of, deep historical consciousness. Not long after the party, Matt relates one of Eric's most disturbing stories to his girlfriend, Janet, and concludes by asking, "Is this when history turned to fiction?" (459). His question emphasizes the fact that Eric's downwinder myths, even as they appear to offer an alternative, underground narrative of history, actually speed, rather than stave off, the "flattening" of Matt's historical consciousness. When Janet refuses to take an ethical stand on his work, Matt is left wondering "if the state had taken on the paranoia of the individual or was it the other way around. [. . .] Because everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does" (465). Matt's vision of history anticipates the Jamesonian computer-game historiography which emerges in the epilogue of DeLillo's novel, in which any possibility of a layering or depth to history is denied.

In *Underworld*, the need for specialized mythologies extends far beyond the Pocket and those directly involved in nuclear arms production. Matt's brother Nick Shay, the novel's central protagonist, works for Whiz Co, a Los Angeles-based waste management company. While still a new employee of the corporation, Nick attends a conference on "The Future of Waste" located near a freshly-commissioned desert landfill. Visiting the enormous, polyethylene-lined crater with his co-worker, Sims, Nick reacts to the sight with a reluctant awe that reflects Matt's feelings about the bomb:

I was taken by surprise. The sight of this thing, the enormous gouged bowl lined with artful plastic, was the first material sign I'd had that this was a business of a certain drastic grandeur, even a kind of greatness, maybe [. . .]. I listened to Sims recite the numbers, how much methane we would recover to light how many homes, and I felt a weird elation, a loyalty to the company and the cause. (285)

Nick's growing sense of connectedness to the corporation and its aims leads him to spend more and more time with Sims, who, like Eric Massingale, has a penchant for rumormongering. Chief among Sims's paranoid preoccupations is the story of the Flying Liberian, a "spectral ship" (278) reputedly sailing the world's oceans for the last two years, prevented at every port from unloading its unknown, apparently hazardous cargo. This "folk tale" is already familiar to Nick as an employee of the company; but his interest in the legendary ship is heightened when Sims starts providing updates about its contents and direction, garnered from a secret contact on the outposts of the waste management industry. As the rumoured cargo of the Liberian evolves to include toxic waste, heroin, shit, and a corpse, and as its anticipated port of landing draws ever nearer Los Angeles, Nick finds that he is becoming increasingly like Sims, who has already confessed that, since joining the corporation, "everything I see is garbage" (283). Before long, when Nick goes sight-seeing with his family, he discovers that he is more interested in the protective canopy atop an ancient ruin than in the ruin itself. He realizes, "I was becoming Simslake, too soon, seeing garbage everywhere or reading it into a situation" (343).

The legend of the Flying Liberian, like that of Eric Massingale's downwinders, is a myth spawned by excessive compartmentalization in one area of a commodity flow. Where Matt, in the Pocket, is prevented from seeing the end-products of his labour, Nick is unable to envision anything *but* the ends and left-overs of mass consumption. Moreover, like the downwinders stories, the Flying Liberian exerts a hold on the imagination independent of its claim to truth. Nick and Sims, like Matt and Eric, are both

inclined not to believe the rumours they spread; yet they cling to the evolving narrative because it provides them with a means of reconciling themselves to the drastic, and disturbing, change of perspective on material culture which their profession demands. In this respect, the Flying Liberian calls to mind a unique and particularly extreme version of the fetishization of commodity flows, which suggests that the loss of historical consciousness in Nick and Sims is particularly acute. The Liberian legend, centered on the future delivery of mysterious and potentially dangerous cargo, can be taken as a postmodern manifestation of a “cargo cult”--a social and religious practice most closely associated with the Western (especially American) colonization of Melanesia in the years following World War II. Arising out of the natives’ dissatisfaction with inequalities in material wealth and social authority between themselves and their colonizers, cargo beliefs were organized around the coming of a millennial cargo delivery that would reverse these inequalities. Promising both an unlimited influx of scarce Western commodities, as well as a “radical change of the known order” (Trompf 160), cargoism denotes a complex syncretic practice in which older spiritual myths and narratives are transformed through contact with Western religion and material goods.¹⁸ That Nick and Sims should find themselves re-activating the form, if not the content, of Melanesian cargo cults in 1970s America is an indication that immersion in the new postmodern industry of waste management occasions a spiritual and historical disorientation on a par with that experienced by a people suddenly exposed to the existence of an entirely new world.

Indeed, the Liberian myth serves as a medium through which initiates into the

world of waste management can be disabused of certain “primitive” beliefs. Embodied in several of the rumours surrounding the ship is the breakdown of conventional ideas about commodity flows and what distinguishes commodities, as articles of value, from waste. The Liberian’s travels take place in the context of a secret form of international exchange of which Nick, as a new employee of Whiz Co, is only just learning:

Sims said, “The ship’s been out there, sailing port to port, it’s almost two years now.”

“And what? They won’t accept the cargo?”

“Country after country.” [. . .]

“I thought terrible substances were dumped routinely in LDCs.”

An LDC, I’d just found out, was a less developed country in the language of banks and other global entities.

“Those little dark-skinned countries. Yes, it’s a nasty business that’s getting bigger all the time. A country will take a fee amounting to four times its gross national product to accept a shipment of toxic waste. What happens after that? We don’t want to know.” (278)

Transactions like this, in which both commodity and cash are exchanged for silence, reveal that secrecy itself has become a form of capitalist currency. And this currency, in turn, opens up new and unexpected avenues of profit. Jesse Detwiler, renowned theorist and archaeologist of garbage, tells Nick of the potential for a vast new tourist industry in America’s toxic landfills, given that waste is “the best-kept secret in the world” (281). Not surprisingly, when Detwiler hears of the Flying Liberian from Nick and Sims, he cuts through their skepticism and affirms the need for belief in the myth:

“A ship carrying thousands of barrels of industrial waste. Or is it CIA heroin? I can believe this myself. You know why? Because it’s easy to believe. We’d be stupid not to believe it. Knowing what we know.”

“What do we know?” Sims said. [. . .]

“That everything’s connected,” Jesse said. (289)

Detwiler’s conviction, like Matt’s revelation in the Pocket, pretends to a deep historical

knowledge which it in fact displaces and disables. Under the umbrella of all-connectedness, myths like the Flying Liberian serve to offset the loss of ability to represent the system as a whole. On the surface, this appears to promise a pluralistic patchwork of “micro-histories” capable of undermining totalizing metanarratives whose demise, according to Lyotard, is the hallmark of postmodernity. But *Underworld* paints, on the whole, a dark picture of historical relativism at this level. Detwiler’s exhortation to believe in the myth is too nearly the response of a subject who, as Matt sees it, is “already systemed under, prepared to half believe everything because this is the only intelligent response” (465). Specialized mythologies like that of the Flying Liberian demand the sacrifice of a primitive or naive belief in a singular truth; but they replace that belief not with a plurality of multiple truths, but with indifference to the concept of verification.¹⁹ Here, finally, is the most crucial difference between the postwar cargo cults of the Melanesian islanders, and the postmodern cultism of those adrift on late capitalist commodity flows. Traditional cultists “have a problem with present conditions because the cultural past--however capable of evoking nostalgias--has been thrown into doubt” (Trompf 238). Nick, Sims, and Detwiler certainly face this problem in contemporary America. Yet where Melanesian cargoism is rooted in enthusiasm for a new symbolic order, in which inequalities will be righted and the colonizers will be put down, the cargo beliefs of DeLillo’s characters retain no such revolutionary edge. “Half-belief,” the psychic trademark of the fetishist, is also the mark of a subject colonized by technologies which hamper the ability even to *imagine* alternatives to the dominant ideology.

The Flying Liberian, together with Massingale's downwinders, represent mythologized visions of postmodern commodity flows in which origins and ends, and the distinction between production and consumption, have become deeply problematized. As a result, they are "examples of the many forms that the fetishism of commodities can take when there are sharp discontinuities in the distribution of knowledge concerning their trajectories of circulation" (Appadurai 54). *Underworld* portrays this kind of protection as prevalent and deeply seductive; but it does not restrict historical representation to these forms. Klara Sax's art re-uses waste material and places it in new signifying contexts, parodying cultural processes of de-materialization even as it mimics them. As several critics have observed, this artistic strategy establishes an oppositional historical aesthetic that is mirrored in the structure of the novel as a whole. I propose, however, that the underlying motive of Klara's work, articulated in her desire to find the "ordinary life behind the thing," is likewise a strategy for constructing alternative histories. Klara's artistic aim resonates with Appadurai's and Kopytoff's emphasis on the need to examine the cultural lives of objects--a "methodological fetishism" which offers a "corrective to the tendency to excessively socialize transactions in things" (Appadurai 5). Although this strategy is evident only indirectly in Klara's art, it is, I suggest, readily observed in the efforts of those characters who seek out the Thomson baseball through the progress of DeLillo's novel.

Critical discussions of the Thomson ball and its significance in *Underworld* have largely dismissed the efforts of its questers as indicative of authentic yearnings for historical understanding. Osteen reads the ball as a souvenir in Susan Stewart's terms--an

object arising “out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia” (135, quoted in Osteen, *American* 229). In Osteen’s view, the ball’s magic derives from the false hope it instills in the lonely men who search for it, and consequently, each of these becomes “a counterfeit, a dodger--a living exemplum of the bad faith and inauthenticity that characterizes the Cold War period” (229-30). Parrish, interpreting the baseball game as a cultural memory which replaces that of the bomb, argues that, “[r]ecovering the ball becomes a way of refusing both history and one’s involvement in it” (701). In opposition to these readings, however, it is possible to see the quest for the baseball as an attempt to recover or reconstruct a sense of materiality otherwise lost in the proliferation of simulacra that characterizes postmodern America. The longing for unmediated presence--even if frustrated or impossible--that undergirds the quest can be taken as a legitimate effort at historical representation which, unlike the specialized mythologies analyzed earlier, refuses to mask the sense of loss which motivates it.

Indeed, the crucial difference between the quest for the baseball, and myths like that of the Flying Liberian, stems from the demythologizing effects attributed to the ball throughout the novel. Beginning with its first appearance in “The Triumph of Death,” the baseball systematically dismantles a number of myths with which it comes into contact. Naturally enough, the first myths exploded by the baseball are those surrounding the institution of the game itself. The ball’s entry into the stands at the Polo Grounds immediately prompts the disintegration of the myth of inclusivity faithfully maintained by DeLillo’s text up to this point. Cotter Martin’s irrepressible urge to claim the ball is described as a desire that sets him apart from the crowd in which, as we have seen, Cold

War ideology symbolically takes root:

Next thing Cotter knows he is sidling into the aisle. [. . .] Nobody much seems to notice. The ball is back there in a mighty pile-up of shirts and jackets. The game is way behind him. The crowd can have the game. He's after the baseball now and there's no time to ask himself why. They hit it in the stands, you go and get it. (45)

When, after struggling violently for the ball, Cotter is finally able to claim it, he discovers that his chief opponent in the melee has been none other than Bill Waterson, the white construction owner who befriended him during the game. The breakdown of this friendship in the text is a powerful counterpoint to Hoover's bomb-inspired revelation about community. Where Hoover's awe of the bomb and its destructive power leads him to a vision of community in excess of baseball's mythical levelling of racial and class difference, Cotter's unreasoning pursuit of the ball explodes the same myth.

The Thomson ball's deconstructive impact on more specific legends surrounding the game is emphasized soon after in the discussion, already mentioned, between Nick, Sims, Glassic, and Jane Farrish. When Sims is informed, in the midst of their group analysis of the Thomson homer, that Nick is in possession of the home run ball itself, he refuses to believe it, and buttresses his skepticism with reference to the cultural myth of the ball's disappearance:

"Nobody has the ball," Sims said. "The ball never turned up. Whoever once had the ball, it never surfaced. This is part of the whole--what? The mythology of the game. Nobody ever showed up and made a verifiable claim to this is the ball. Or a dozen people showed up, each with a ball, which amounts to the same thing." (96)

Sims's disbelief is anchored in his desire to preserve intact the historical aura of the game--an aura which, as "The Triumph of Death" reveals, is dependent in part on

memorializing the moment at which the ball disappears into the crowd. After the game, while observing the spot at which the Thomson ball entered the stands (a spot with historical significance “[l]ike where Lee surrendered to Grant or some such thing”), Russ Hodges comes to believe that “they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power” (59). Sims’s desire to preserve this “protective power” could be taken, initially, for an effort to affirm the ball’s materiality over and against the technological re-productions which, as all three men believe, distinguishes the Giants/Dodgers game from events like the Kennedy assassination. Yet it is at this point that the designation of the baseball game as pre-technological is revealed as ideologically constructed. For the myth of the ball’s disappearance is, in itself, a narrative through which the object’s escape from official narratives of history is reinterpreted as a *support* for that history. Walker is correct when he observes that the Thomson ball, which ends up in Cotter Martin’s hands rather than in the possession of a legitimate ticket-holder like Bill Waterson, escapes its cultural destiny as a museum exhibit (452-53). Yet while the ball’s escape from transformation into a display-case simulacrum heightens its “physical actuality” (Walker 453), it is important to recognize that this heightening is only temporary. The myth of the ball’s disappearance overwrites its “lost” materiality with the problematics of authenticity, thereby returning it, even if only as an absence, to the official narrative. Manx Martin, after stealing the ball from his son, decides against selling it back to the Polo Grounds as a trophy because he knows he cannot document how it came into his possession (359). This decision, far from securing the object’s materiality outside the dominant narratives

of the game, is instead the first step toward the mythical equation of authenticity and absence where the ball is concerned. Sims cannot believe Nick has the home run ball because the symbolic power of the game--its authenticity as a cultural memory--has come to depend in part upon the ball's never resurfacing.

That Sims recognizes on some level the threat posed by the appearance of the ball is implied in his response to Nick's explanation of its personal significance. For Nick, the Thomson ball embodies loss:

Well, I didn't buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it. It's not about Thomson hitting the homer. It's about Branca making the pitch. It's all about losing. [. . .]

It's about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss. I don't know. I keep saying I don't know and I don't. But it's the only thing in my life that I absolutely had to own. (97)

Nick's explanation shapes an indirect challenge to the game's historical aura by showcasing its dependence on loss rather than on a notion of perpetual presence owing to lack of technological reproduction. Sims's angry reaction is to deny that loss has anything to do with the legacy of the game. Calling attention to the fact that both Thomson and Branca have been afforded heroic status for their role in the event, Sims attempts to buttress the game's historical power with reference to another, much less storied home run, and the murder/suicide of the player who threw the pitch. In the process, however, Sims's argument betrays the very mythology he attempts to uphold. Maintaining that Branca was given the opportunity to "survive" his defeat on the pitching mound because he was white, Sims's outrage at the racial prejudice woven into baseball's history performs, apparently unbeknownst to him, a demythologizing far more damaging than Nick's own.

Yet the ball's demystifying powers extend to myths beyond those explicitly associated with baseball. Nick's identification of the ball with loss, given the historical ties established between the Dodgers/Giants game and the Soviet atomic test, also suggests that the foregrounding of the ball's status as a symbolic and material *absence* has wide-ranging effects on historical representation. Hodges's invocation of a "protective power" arising out of the object's disappearance in the crowd suggests an equivalence between the Thomson baseball and the hydrogen bomb. Latent in this equivalence is the implication that the re-emergence of the ball poses a material threat not only to the aura of the game, but also, symbolically, to those Cold War ideologies for which the game serves as a fantasy scene.

Of course, identifying the de-mythologizing functions of the baseball at this level requires revising the idea that the ball is an "ordinary thing" in the sense suggested by Appadurai or Kopytoff, or by *Underworld's* Klara Sax.²⁰ As is suggested in Nick's description of the singularity and uniqueness of his desire for the ball, the object is a fetish in itself; yet the symbolic register in which this fetishism functions is difficult to specify for quester and reader alike. Nick's confusion about why he wants the ball, which he confesses three times in the novel (97, 191, 809), is shared by virtually every character who seeks it, from Cotter (45) to Charles Wainwright (532) to Marvin Lundy (191). The inability of these characters to specify the register of the object's significance is a by-product of the oscillation which the ball undergoes through the course of its cultural life from found object to holy grail, stolen article to gift, priceless commodity to trash. Although, as Appadurai and Kopytoff explain, shifts in the career of a thing are

encountered in the biography of any cultural object, the strong emphasis which *Underworld* places on the Thomson ball's disruption of binary categories reveals a "methodological fetishism" which threatens to erode the notion of linear historical continuity on which Appadurai's theory depends.

I suggest that, by virtue of its defiance of binary ontologies, the baseball in DeLillo's text is a prime example of Baudrillard's "fatal object," which challenges dominant ideologies by refusing to submit to the logic of the sign. Like the fatal object, the Thomson baseball "has no value, but is priceless. It is an object of no interest, and at the same time absolutely singular, without equivalent, and almost sacred" (Baudrillard, *Fatal* 47). In particular, the ball, like the object of Baudrillard's theory, problematizes the act of exchange on which capitalist economies are predicated. The initial sale of the ball by Manx Martin to Charles Wainwright (645-55) leaves both men feeling cheated and uneasy, and every subsequent hand-off of the ball redoubles the disquiet in which its original purchase is shrouded. As Ruth Helyer observes, "like the corpse of a loved one, none of [the ball's] recipients ever seems to know what to do with it, other than revere it and put it away somewhere safe" (993). For Baudrillard, who explicitly likens the fatal object to a corpse (*Fatal* 47), this disquiet in the presence of the object is a subtle recognition of its most troubling--and potentially liberating--threat, which is its ability to unseat the subject at the center of historical and epistemological inquiry. At the moment of the "crystal revenge," according to Baudrillard, "[t]he entire destiny of the subject passes into the object. For universal causality, irony substitutes the fatal power of a singular object" (114). Nick Shay's fixation on the ball as an object embodying loss is, I

suggest, a strategy for regaining contact with a material opacity and otherness obstructed by his initiation into the world of waste management. Where garbage, for Nick, takes on a hitherto unimaginable range of new values and signifying functions, the baseball's power derives from its short-circuiting of epistemological efforts to delimit the scope of the loss it embodies.

It may appear counter-intuitive to label the Thomson baseball a fatal object, given the significance which DeLillo's text attributes to the cultural fetishism of the bomb. Clearly, the hydrogen bomb appears, at first, a likelier candidate than a baseball for designation as the source of "fatal" influences. Yet on closer examination, the bomb in DeLillo's novel is repeatedly associated with the reduction of materiality to sign-value, and with the production of a state of hyperreality to which fatal strategies, in Baudrillard's theory, are opposed. Meanwhile the baseball, set apart as a site marked by the emergence of a threatening materiality, more nearly represents the fatal object and its power to thwart the reductive mechanisms of a widespread cultural fetishism of the code. In this sense, the opposition suggested by the text between the cultural fetishism of the bomb, and the personal fetishism of the baseball by characters like Nick and Marvin Lundy, is reflective of two contemporary variations on Appadurai's methodological fetishism. The bomb, as I have argued, is an example of Miklitsch's concept of the commodity/body/sign--a concept developed in part through a reading of Appadurai which treats the form of his cultural biographies as proof that the distinctions between commodities and bodies lies entirely within the purview of sign-value (Miklitsch 86). Alternatively, the baseball pushes the implications of Appadurai's methodological

fetishism in the opposite direction, toward a radical break with commodity exchange and the logic of the sign that is theorized by anthropologist Peter Pels. For Pels, Appadurai's methodological fetishism provides the basis for acknowledging the fetish's threat to signifying structures, and to the humanistic assumption that meaning resides in the subjective projection of value onto objects (92-98). In the fetishist's affirmation of a threatening "untranscended materiality," Pels's theory overlaps with the effects of Baudrillard's fatal object, enabling the possibility of alternative temporal and historical models.²¹

Of course, as Baudrillard makes clear, the disruptive historical potential of the fatal object can be realized only if the subject recognizes the essential challenges posed by the fetish (*Fatal* 115). And it is here, perhaps, that *Underworld* falls just short of affirming the fetishism of the Thomson baseball as a historical practice, at least for the two chief characters who pursue it: Nick Shay and Marvin Lundy. Nick, the owner of the ball at the conclusion of the book, ends up with only a dim awareness of its magical and historical power. Prior to this point in the narrative, he has held tenaciously to his belief that history is essentially an open exhibit, enshrined for all to see in "museums and plazas and memorial parks" (86). Yet in the novel's epilogue he visits the "Museum of Misshapens" not far from the old Soviet atomic test site in Kazakhstan, and his faith is finally shaken. After contemplating pickle jars filled with deformed human fetuses, Nick reports, "I begin to feel something drain out of me. Some old opposition, a capacity to resist" (801). His last mention of the baseball betrays little evidence of his earlier enthusiasm for its power as a monument to loss:

This is how I came across the baseball, rearranging books on the shelves. I look at it and squeeze it hard and put it back on the shelf, wedged between a slanted book and a straight-up book, an expensive and beautiful object that I keep half hidden, maybe because I tend to forget why I bought it. Sometimes I know exactly why I bought it and other times I don't, a beautiful thing smudged green near the Spalding trademark and bronzed with nearly half a century of earth and sweat and chemical change, and I put it back and forget it until next time. (809)

Marvin Lundy comes closer than Nick to perceiving the ball's potential to disrupt official narratives of history, although he too eventually falls back on a nostalgic view of the past. Lundy's obsessive quest for the baseball, spanning over two decades, leads him to formulate a "dot theory of reality," according to which history is defined by the clarity of photographic evidence. Refusing to accept the ball's disappearance, Lundy searches for it in the unexamined pixels of every photograph he can obtain of the Dodgers/Giants game. In this manner, his quest brings him face to face with the fact that it is technology which "makes reality come true" (177). Yet although Lundy's ability to challenge official narratives through technology reveals the means by which Cold War ideology perpetuates itself, his efforts are finally redirected toward the exchange-value of the artifacts he recovers. As he tells Brian Glassic, "There's men in the coming years they'll pay fortunes for these objects. They'll pay unbelievable. Because this is desperation speaking" (182). Seeking to recuperate the costs he has incurred in his long quest for the ball, Lundy succumbs to the temptation to treat his obsession as a nostalgic longing, rather than an effort to transform and reconfigure loss through its material traces.

Nevertheless, if DeLillo's novel fails to offer a character capable of fully grasping the historical potential of the baseball as a fatal object, the structure of *Underworld* invites the reader to recognize the significance of a "crystal revenge." In portraying the

baseball as a fatal object for Nick and Marvin, and in organizing the novel around the serpentine historical travels of this object, DeLillo's novel transforms Appadurai's methodological fetishism into a new fictional and historiographic aesthetic. Rather than demonstrate how the cultural biography of a thing temporalizes the commodity state, DeLillo's depiction of the life of the Thomson ball leads one to wonder whether the complexity of Cold War history can be understood from any single subject's perspective. *Underworld* invites the conclusion that historical consciousness, within postmodernism, necessitates a partial transfer of the responsibility for historical meaning from the subject to the object. In the process, fetishism, as the most recognized example of such a transfer, becomes the basis for new forms of historical practice.

Notes

1. DeLillo has acknowledged the influence of Pynchon's work on his own, and the tendency to deny narrative satisfaction, and to thematize the links between obsession, fetishism, and fascism in DeLillo's early fiction is one which can be seen to derive from Pynchon. Lieutenant Slothrop's literal decomposition during the final quarter of *Gravity's Rainbow* remains the paradigmatic example of a fictional quester "undone" by his obsessions. The final scene of Pynchon's novel, in which a theatre crowd, led in song by a thinly-disguised Richard Nixon, awaits the fall of the mythical Rocket that will destroy them, is clearly a suggestion that the United States has imported fascism alongside Germany's rocketry technology.

Interestingly, *Underworld* has been compared more closely to Pynchon's much shorter *The Crying of Lot 49* than to *Gravity's Rainbow*. Duvall argues that the end of DeLillo's novel recalls the fate of Oedipa Maas through its analysis of revelation (274). Tanner, commenting on the theme of waste shared by *Lot 49* and *Underworld*, accuses of DeLillo of writing nothing more than a "prolonged and repetitious quoting, or reworking, of Pynchon" (59). Oddly, this does not prevent him from complaining that "*Underworld* has no Tristero" (60).

2. Not that DeLillo's writing of quest narratives, even in the earlier phases of his career, can always be interpreted in a purely critical light. As Osteen points out, *Running Dog* is also a self-reflexive commentary on DeLillo's own artistic practices, since his book, centered on a lost, fictional Nazi artifact, is itself an example of marketed obsession, catering to that "fascination with fascism" which it partially condemns ("Marketing" 153).

3. For lists of critical articles on DeLillo which analyze his pre-*Underworld* fiction in relation to the theories of postmodernism and Baudrillard in particular, see Carmichael 205 and Maltby 260. In recent years, critics have begun to question the precise fit between DeLillo's fiction and the theories within which *White Noise* and *Libra*, in particular, were initially slotted. Among such critics is Maltby, who argues that DeLillo's later work is better understood as a contemporary return to a Romantic "politics of vision" which affirms the possibility of transcendent, visionary experience (274). In denying that postmodern irony is the definitive feature of DeLillo's fiction, Maltby is joined by Mullen, who sees DeLillo working, even in the early novels, to "detach himself from the indulgence in what Baudrillard calls the 'fatal strategies' of life in a 'hyperreal' postmodern world" (116).

4. A fact missed by several critics of DeLillo's novel (see, for example, Nel 734 and Duvall 259) is that the baseball game coincides only with President Truman's public *announcement* of the Soviet test, not the test itself. Joe-2, as the shot was called by insiders (for Joseph Stalin), actually occurred a week and a half earlier, on September 24, 1951. It was detected almost immediately on the basis of its acoustic signature by the U. S. Air Force's Atomic Energy Detection System, and verified shortly after by high-flying aircraft designed to collect radioactive matter in the atmosphere (Ziegler and Jacobson

216). The issue of detection is touched upon much later in *Underworld*, when Bronzini, seeing the Times headline, reflects: "How did we detect evidence of the blast, I wonder. We must have aircraft flying near their borders with instruments that measure radiation." (669). Bronzini's intuition here is remarkable, since knowledge of American detection systems at this time was top-secret, and the public announcement of Soviet tests was actually delayed so as to conceal the existence and efficacy of these devices. For more on the detection of the first two Soviet atomic tests, and the politics involved in their disclosure, see Ziegler and Jacobson 199-223.

5. Both of these newspaper accounts are discussed much later in *Underworld* (668-69). DeLillo has revealed in an essay written shortly after the publication of the novel ("The Power of History") that it was the discovery of the front-page Times account that spawned his interest in recreating the famous game. He did so first in a short story called "Pafko at the Wall," which was subsequently adapted to serve as the prologue of *Underworld*. Some of the differences between "Pafko" and "The Triumph of Death" are significant. For a summary and discussion of the most important differences, see Walker 454-56.

6. *Americana*, which details the cross-country pilgrimage of its central character, Daniel Bell, in a post-Beat search for authentic America, ends with a trip through Dealy Plaza. Also prior to *Libra*, DeLillo made explicit his thesis that postmodern American history began with the Kennedy assassination in his 1983 *Rolling Stone* essay, "American Blood." Yet as Duvall observes, in *Underworld* "DeLillo seems to be moving away from a strictly Baudrillardian notion of the orders of simulacra as he locates American culture's immersion in mediation progressively earlier, first in *Libra* (set in the early 1960s) and now in "Pafko"'s evocation of the 1950s" (272). Knight also reads *Underworld* as a revision of DeLillo's earlier, Kennedy-centered "anatomy of popular American paranoia" (812).

7. For a critical reading of the Kennedy assassination in *Libra* as structured by nostalgic self-consciousness, see Carmichael 206-07.

8. For a detailed reading of the way in which DeLillo's prologue both supports and deconstructs various nationalistic baseball myths, see Duvall.

9. Rapid fictional jump-cuts between scenes are a definitive aspect of DeLillo's style, particularly in his early work. For a discussion of their significance in the 70s quest novels, see Osteen, "Marketing" 138-41.

10. Hoover's denial of the bomb's existence, even when faced with the facts, has a historical precedent in the figure of Harry Truman, who told the press as late as January 1953 that he doubted the Soviets had either atomic or hydrogen weapons (Herken 39).

11. To understand these moral objections (which might appear ironic coming from scientists who had already worked on weapons of mass destruction) requires recognizing that the evolutionary leap in destructive power from the atomic bomb to the hydrogen

bomb is quantitatively as great as the leap from conventional to atomic explosives. The atomic bomb operates according to the principle of fission, whereby heavy atoms, such as uranium or plutonium, are split apart, liberating the energy within them. The hydrogen or thermonuclear bomb, on the other hand, derives its power from the fusion of light atoms, such as hydrogen and its isotopes, in a manner which duplicates the functioning of stars. The difference in destructive potential between these reactions, when converted into weaponry, derives from the fact that fission requires a certain "critical mass" of its unstable fuel in order to function, while the fusion reaction requires only sufficient heat to initiate it. Atomic bombs therefore have inherent physical limitations regarding explosive power, whereas the yield of the hydrogen bomb can be theoretically increased *ad infinitum* by providing more and more combustible. As an illustration of the difference in potency between these weapons, the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima exploded with a force equivalent to ten thousand tons of conventional explosive, resulting in eighty thousand civilian casualties. The first test of the Super bomb technology, at Eniwetok Atoll in the Pacific Ocean, was one thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima blast, yielding the equivalent of ten *million* tons of TNT. *Underworld* contains a veiled reference to this test (famous because it vaporized the island on which it was conducted) as "one of the monster shots that vaped an atoll way back when" (403). That the tremendous increase in power of thermonuclear over atomic weapons did not occasion a historical impact akin to that between conventional and atomic weapons in the American psyche is, I suggest, one of the driving historical subtexts of DeLillo's novel. For more on the development and testing of the Super, and the political and scientific opposition to it, see Rhodes 382-512 and Herken 34-65.

12. The most pointed ironizing of this "gap" ideology is still to be found in the final scene of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963). Here the American president and his bloodthirsty general listen rapt to Strangelove's description of a post-nuclear war world, in which the human population is reduced to a handful of American and Soviet officials trapped in mine-shafts. Although enamoured, at first, by the prospect of luxurious outfittings for these underworld dwellings, General Turgison (played by George C. Scott) spies danger in the possibility of the Soviets sneaking nuclear weapons into their shafts, giving them a decisive advantage in the post-apocalypse. Turgison's impassioned plea, "Mr. President, we must not allow a mine-shaft gap!" is the last line before Strangelove's miraculous "*Mein Führer, I can walk!*" and the montage of nuclear explosions which ends the film.

13. The Super bomb designed by Edward Teller and Stanislaw Ulam in the spring of 1951 was a two-stage device utilizing a fission explosion as a trigger to ignite its tritium and deuterium fuel. For a detailed explanation of the functioning of this device, which provided the model for the vast majority of thermonuclear weapons in the United States, see Rhodes 490-508. On a metaphoric level, the structure of *Underworld* also reflects this design, as it uses the flight of the baseball, frequently identified with the Russian atomic shot, to establish its various historical fusions.

14. Curtis LeMay, head of Strategic Air Command, boasted in the late 1950s that the United States Air Force, armed with the hydrogen bomb, was capable of “killing a nation” as large as the Soviet Union overnight (Rhodes 560).

15. I am in agreement with Patrick O'Donnell when he observes that, in *Underworld*, “cultural paranoia is not a social disorder, or merely a form of hysteria framed within cold war politics and correctable by an appeal to historical evidence, but an integral part of what constitutes postmodern history” (*Latent* 149). I would clarify, however, that this paranoia repeatedly emerges in DeLillo's novel as a psychic *compensation* for a perceived loss of other forms of historical sensibility or awareness. As a result, paranoid histories in the text tend to connote not a deep model of history, attuned to the differences between official and underground versions, but rather an inability to envision genuine alternatives.

16. The symbolic ability of the bomb to play across the gender divide is discussed in historical analyses as well. I suggested earlier that the popular term “the bomb,” which conflates fission and fusion weapons, conceals an important historical progression from the atomic to the thermonuclear age. Weisgall points out that the same terminology also conceals an interesting evolution in the bomb's gender, from neuter, to male, to female, and then back to neuter. While the first atomic bomb, as Klara Sax observes in *Underworld*, had no proper name, the bombs dropped on Japan were both male (Little Boy and Fat Man), and the next two atomic tests, conducted a year later at Bikini Atoll, were female (Gilda and Helen). The location of these latter, highly-publicized tests provided the name for the scanty two-piece bathing suit first shown in Paris four days later, said to have an “atomic” impact. For more on the significance of this gendered evolution, see Weisgall 262-65.

17. For a fuller treatment of Miklitsch's concept, see Chapter Two of this study.

18. Two very thorough discussions of the history of cargo cultism as a practice and an anthropological concept can be found in Trompf 156-281 and Lindstrom 15-72. Trompf's study traces the origins of cargo beliefs to the earliest contacts between the Western world and the peoples of New Guinea (west Papua) in the mid-nineteenth century. His argument foregrounds the anti-colonial spirit underlying cargo practices. Lindstrom offers a more populist history of the term “cargo cult” from its first appearance in anthropological literature in 1945, to its proliferation across a number of disciplines and cultural discourses in subsequent years. As Lindstrom points out, “cargo cult” has become a contested term in the discipline in which it originated, and many anthropologists no longer use it (41-43).

19. The lack of concern which Matt, Eric, Nick, and Sims express regarding the verification of their respective myths clearly problematizes their ability to transform their rumour-mongering into political action. Of course, many of Eric's downwinders stories have a strong basis in historical fact. Harrowing accounts of the effects of American nuclear testing on United States citizens and military personnel can be found in Gallagher

and Weisgall. Likewise, the existence of the Flying Liberian is confirmed in *Underworld* when Marvin Lundy, searching on a San Francisco dock for an important lead in the search for the Thomson baseball, stumbles across a rust-covered, graffiti-decked ship giving off a “public funk of portable toilets” (312).

20. In fact, Klara’s concept of the “ordinary thing” encompasses an element of the protective power attributed to the Thomson baseball. The example she discusses is the nose-art found on one of her de-commissioned B-52s, a portrait of a leggy young woman named “Long Tall Sally,” from which her installation, and Part One of DeLillo’s novel, takes its title. Describing how she wants to make the “individual life” which inspired this painting part of her own work, she concludes by calling it a “sign against death” for the men flying the bombing missions (77-78). Much later in the novel, Louis T. Bakey, one of those men, reconstructs part of the life of “Long Tall Sally” with reference to the original Little Richard song (607-12).

21. For more on the relationship between Pels’s theory and those of Appadurai and Baudrillard, see Chapter Two of this study.

CONCLUSION

This study has been an attempt to harmonize recent theoretical debates about the fetish with a detailed analysis of postmodernist fiction. I have attempted to delineate an absorbed or affirmative perspective on fetishism as a practice with constructive historical potential through an analysis of the philosophical lineage of fetish discourses, and through close readings of works by five postmodern American authors. The purely theoretical portion of the study, which comprises Part One, advances the argument that an affirmative historical orientation toward fetishism is characterized by an ontological perspective on the fetish object which recognizes its status as an index of multiple worlds or realities embodying multiple historical narratives. The turn toward analyses of postmodernist stories and novels in Part Two is justified on the basis that recent theoretical debates about fetishism, even as they reveal the potential of this ontological perspective, fail to develop it in its most radical form. Postmodernist fiction, as a discourse which inherently privileges ontological approaches to the objects and worlds which it depicts, is naturally conducive to an absorbed historical approach wherever fetishism is directly thematized within the text.

In analyzing fictional works by Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, John Hawkes, and Don DeLillo, my aim has not been to reduce these texts to proofs of a more general philosophical argument. To militate against such reductionism, I have attempted, in my reading of each author, to avoid reiterating the general philosophical principles underlying the absorbed historical approach to fetishism developed in Part One of the study. Instead, I have focused on the emergence of an absorbed perspective at

specific instances in each text, and I have analyzed these moments using the theoretical tools best suited to them. For instance, the reader may have noted that the discourse of possible worlds, which plays a prominent role in the first three chapters of the study, is backgrounded in my analyses of postmodernist fiction. This is not because the affirmation of possible worlds is irrelevant in those texts. Quite the contrary, ontological interpenetration between spheres of reality is an explicit aspect of the “boundary objects” in Coover’s *Spanking the Maid*, and it is implicitly reflected in Papa’s “world-creating” aesthetic in *Travesty*, and in the very title of DeLillo’s *Underworld*. Yet because this ontological aspect has been established as an aesthetic dominant of postmodernist fiction, as I discuss in Chapter Three, I have chosen to elaborate it only where it bears a direct impact on what I take to be the central statement about fetishism in each text. Acker’s discussion of female fetishism, for example, is certainly amenable to a possible worlds analysis, where the affirmation of distinct and multiple realities is found in the oppositions between a monolithic (male) history and its fragmented (female) “beyond,” or between the privileged and unified social sphere of doctors, teachers, and politicians, and the complex spaces of the underprivileged found throughout Acker’s late work. Nevertheless, I have not pursued such a reading out of respect for what I take to be Acker’s more direct, and urgent, political project in addressing female fetishism, which is its potential to figure myths beyond those of phallogocentric history or theory. I am aware that this strategy may have given the impression, at times, that the philosophical principles advanced in support of fetishism as a historical practice had been left behind in my readings of postmodernist fiction. I believe, however, that this deprivileging

procedure was necessary both to avoid unnecessary repetition in the individual analyses, and, more importantly, to prevent the misconception that my selected authors were in some sense committed to a set of common philosophical, historical, or political principles. Although, as I hypothesize in the Introduction to this study, the recent “fetishism of fetishism” in theoretical circles can be taken to reflect a common, implicit dissatisfaction with the portrayal of fetishism as a discourse about history, I remain concerned with offsetting any notion that Pynchon, Acker, Coover, Hawkes, and DeLillo are committed to thematizing fetishism for the same reasons.

Utilizing this strategy, I believe I have been able to draw out the constructive historical potential of fetishism in each text without misrepresenting its suggested political consequences. In some authors, what I interpret as an affirmation of fetishism as a historical practice exists alongside grave doubts about the political valences of fetishistic practices. This has not caused me undue concern, for I have nowhere maintained that the identification of fetishism as a historical practice necessarily implies its political endorsement. That Acker remains skeptical about female fetishism as a truly alternative feminist myth, or that DeLillo offers two competing versions of cultural fetishism in *Underworld*, does not contradict the fact that both depict fetishism in a fundamentally non-traditional way, as a practice capable of ordering personal and social historical narratives. I have refrained from speculating on the political consequences of absorbed historical perspectives on the fetish in general terms so as not to commit my fictional analyses to predetermined political conclusions, although more work on the necessary implications of challenging conventional historical models through the fetish

remains to be done.

Likewise, my decision to analyze the work of American authors alone has left much room for further generalization of my conclusions about fetishism in postmodernist fiction. The nationalist restriction I have imposed upon my readings is motivated by the fact that it is in the American literary tradition that the most stable canon of postmodern American authors is to be found. Since my turn toward an analysis of postmodernist fiction as a suitable discourse for the elaboration of fetishism as historical practice is grounded in prominent general definitions of this literary “school,” reliance on a stable body of exemplary authors provides an analytical advantage. This does not mean that fetishism as a historical practice should be interpreted as a distinctly American phenomenon, as I have suggested at various points. The novels of J. G. Ballard and Geoff Nicholson, which I have mentioned briefly in this study, provide strong evidence that similar tendencies are visible in contemporary British fiction. To analyze the work of Ballard or Nicholson along the lines set out in this study would no doubt shed considerable new light on their portrayal of fetishism, obsession, and history. It might also enable a distinction between the way in which British and American authors utilize fetishistic practices to rethink historical narrative structures and knowledge. For the time being, however, I am content with the findings of this study, that postmodern American fiction manifests a shift of historical and philosophical perspective on the fetish object, even if that shift cannot be characterized in general political or nationalistic terms.

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